

DOCTOR WHO

ASYLUM



PETER DARVILL-EVANS

BBC

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'My view' the Doctor said 'is that you can run – in fact it's often by far the best option – but you can't hide. I'll see myself out.'

Nyssa felt a pang of disappointment. He had gone. She would probably never see him again.

The town of Oxford in AD 1278 seems a haven of tranquillity. Under the summer sun, merchants, students and clerics go about their daily, unhurried tasks. Alfric, the proctor of the Franciscan friary, has only two minor problems: one of the friars has gone missing, and there's a travelling showman, calling himself the Doctor, with a pretty young noblewoman by his side, attracting crowds in the narrow streets.

When the missing friar is found dead, the Doctor is convinced he has been murdered. There is a ruthless killer at large, and Alfric reluctantly teams up with the Doctor to track him down.

Their investigation leads towards the most celebrated of the Franciscan brotherhood: Roger Bacon, famed throughout Christendom as a scholar – and, in the far future, the subject of a revolutionary thesis by technographer Nyssa of Traken.

This story features the Fourth Doctor and Nyssa.

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DOCTOR WHO



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PETER DARVILL-EVANS

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[London, AD1346](#)

None of them was the one he sought. Nonetheless he tried to focus his ancient eyes on their young faces.

‘Filthy old beggar,’ one of them stated, hardly belligerently, but more as if he had to say it and begrudged the effort it required. The rain had flattened their hair into dripping strings. Everyone of them was imperfect: one was lame, another wall-eyed, a third twisted, and the others were pocked.

There had been a time, he was sure, once, long ago, a time without rain as cold and hard as slate, a time when young men’s faces hadn’t worn bitter sneers. A time when things had been perfect. Better than this, anyway. If only he could remember...

He put his trembling hand to the side of his head and touched the scar at his temple.

‘Ninety years,’ he said. ‘I’m ninety years old.’ But he couldn’t be sure.

‘Get lost,’ one of the boys said. ‘You’ll get no alms here.

We’re skint.’

They made no attempt to chase him away. They were in a line along the side of the alley, trying to keep their heads under the eaves and their feet out of the rising water.

He didn’t want alms. He had eaten only the previous day.

Or had it been two days? It didn’t matter. The boys looked hungrier than he felt. ‘Where am I?’ he said, turning his face up to the rain.

One of the boys laughed, slowly and deliberately. ‘You’re at the docks, you old fool. Look: ships.’

He didn’t turn to follow the boy’s pointing finger. He had seen the restless masts, the slippery wharves; he had heard the sailors’ curses and he had tasted the bilge-stench on the air.

‘What town? London?’

The boys looked at each other. The one who had spoken to him stepped into the gurgling stream that was running down the centre of the alley and pointed again, to a gap between the thatched roofs. ‘See? London, you daft old tosser.’

How had he not noticed it? Perhaps he had. He couldn’t remember. It was as solid as a mountain, and as square as a single block of stone. The King’s castle, the tallest in the land.

Its sheer walls were grey in the rain, no longer white, but it towered and shone over the little buildings all around.

London, then. Of course. He had known it already. How many days had he been here, searching the maze of streets?

Had he been here before, at some time in his years of wandering? Perhaps he had stood in this very alley, asking, searching, hoping. The place seemed familiar. But was the memory his own, or the other’s?

The boys had lost interest in him. They stood side by side, clutching their short cloaks around their thin bodies, staring at nothing.

Could it be one of these? No: this was an old thought, turning in his

mind like a dog chasing its tail. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate.

‘Strangers,’ he said. ‘Where are the strangers?’

The boys reluctantly lifted their eyes. One of them spat.

‘Plenty of strangers in this part of town,’ he said. ‘Teutons, Frenchies. There’s loads of them.’ He spat again.

‘New strangers. Not here long.’ Something had drawn him here, now. Surely he hadn’t waited so long and wandered so far for no purpose? Again he touched the indentation in his forehead, as if it would help him to recall the shattered, drifting memories.

Them?’ The boy hissed, and the others muttered in support. ‘The Lord knows where they’re from. Built themselves a house, or temple, or something, outside the walls. On the hospital fields. Don’t know why the brothers allowed it. Odd-looking place. Are you one of them?’

Suddenly there was menace in his voice.

‘No,’ he replied, although he couldn’t be sure. ‘I must find them.’

‘Watch out,’ the boy shouted after him as he splashed up the alley. ‘They’re all villains. And they smell. Not even Christians, if you ask me.’

Not even Christians, he thought. He might have smiled, if his face had not forgotten long ago how to do so. He knew what they were. They were demons.

He sheltered and rested under the arches of the Old Gate. He crouched in a dry corner with his old grey cloak pulled around him. He watched and dozed as herds of pigs, and a lady’s carriage, and cans laden with loaves and pies, and laundrywomen, and soldiers, and traders with barrows, and a group of friars, as well as scores of indistinguishable folk crowded past him on their way into or out of the city. A few offered him food, which he took and ate, and a merchant gave him a penny.

Because I’m old, and have a cloak and a staff, he said to himself, they think I’m holy. Or that I’m fulfilling a vow.

He roused himself to shout that he was not holy; he was damned. He had made no vow; he was impelled by a curse.

Children stared at him, but most people shrank from him.

A guard prodded him with the butt of a halberd until, still shouting, he was forced out into the rain.

The roads radiating from the gate were slimed thickly with mud and ordure, and lined with low hovels. The towers of the hospital church lanced the low, grey clouds. As he stumbled nearer to them, the walls and gables and roofs of the hospital loomed above him. He heard the brothers chanting in the choir.

He could go to the gatehouse and ask to be admitted. He had no money, but even in these days a hospital would take in a few penniless travellers. He would lie in a bed with clean linen, and he would be given hot food, and he would end his days surrounded by peace and plainsong.

The thought vanished, like smoke from a fire. He had forgotten what peace felt like. The one he sought was near: If he could find him, and talk to him, then he might find peace.

He knew where to find the building. Perhaps the memories were still there, the silt in the muddy depths of his mind; perhaps he was being drawn to the place. The building was in the corner of a paddock, surrounded by a low fence. His old bones shook when he saw it.

The tracks leading to its door were dark with fresh mud, but there was no one in sight. The walls were disfigured with crude and insulting slogans and smeared with thrown dung.

‘Get out’ was the burden of most of the scrawls; he saw stick-drawn figures hanging from scaffolds. He knew, somehow, that beneath the layers of dirt the walls were of a strange, vitreous substance.

Shivering, perhaps only from the cold and the wet, he dragged himself around the circumference of the building. He could hear nothing from inside. He stopped, and placed his hand against the wall where the rain had washed away the filth.

The wall felt warm, or it seemed to. He was puzzling about this when he heard the voice. From inside the building?

From inside his head? From his memories? He didn’t know.

The module has achieved temporal stasis, the voice said in a language which he knew he shouldn’t understand. We are, at least, somewhere.

Would you rather we had stayed in the null dimension until all of our power cells were used and our Ikshars died?

The words conjured in his imagination a ship, adrift on a stormy ocean, and a boat from it being cast ashore on a rocky island.

Our situation could hardly be worse. This was a different voice. We have insufficient power cells to attempt another dimensional transfer. The module is damaged. We had to kill the Ikshars, and cloak ourselves instead in these weak, malnourished; diseased bodies. And we are in a temporal zone that appears to be thousands of sun-orbits away from the technological level we require.

The first voice again. *We knew that there was a margin of a thousand planetary sun-orbits in either direction. The module was incapable of precise manoeuvring. The Nargrabine Military Council decreed that it should be disabled before we were allowed to depart.*

So much for their claim to be merciful to their defeated opponents!

Indeed. Our misfortunes are the fault of the Nargrab, and we should refrain from bickering among ourselves. Remember that we fought in a just cause. Never forget the Nargrabine aggression.

He heard dozens of voices speaking at once. The side of his head throbbed with the old pain. He saw a battlefield of invisible, endless planes that intersected like rays of light in a crystal, where the castles were flickering, impermanent radiances arid the chargers were transparent globes of light.

The first voice spoke again, and he sensed the others listening with deference. *Many times we have chosen a physical existence. We have all lived monochronously. The Ikshars were hardly more adaptable than the hosts we now inhabit. We can survive like this. And the cells will gather power from this planet's sun. It will take several hundred planetary sun-orbits, but we will be able to enter the null dimension again.*

We have hardly seen this planet's sun since we arrived.

That is true. But our temporal scans suggest that we are in a zone of unusually poor meteorological conditions. I will extend the scans to ascertain how many planetary sun-orbits will pass before the conditions improve.

These bodies do not conceal us from the inhabitants of this place. They can detect us, somehow. And they are hostile.

We must be patient. However distasteful it is, we must open the memories within our host bodies. We must learn to speak like them, even to think like them, so that we can pass undetected among them.

We will lose our own identities. We will forget who we are, and we will become our hosts.

The voices rose again in a tumult. He felt fear in the voices.

That is why we must remain near the module. Here we can be ourselves, no matter how much we become like the natives while we are outside. We must assemble here at regular intervals, determined by the light and dark of the planet's rotation. Until the cells have regained their power, we must live monochronously, and time will govern us. Until the cells have regained their power, this dimension, at this temporal point and in this physical location, must be our home. Let us gather here every time that this point on the planet's surface turns to face its sun, and remember who we are.

He opened his eyes. The rain had stopped. His hands were still shaking. They seemed to shake almost all the time now.

And he could hear his heart beating fitfully, and the clattering sound of each difficult breath in his chest. But none of it mattered. He had to survive only a little longer. He knew he was close.

The voices and visions didn't disturb him. His memory, like the carcass of a beast, had long ago been jointed and consumed, and the bones thrown into a cauldron and boiled for stock. Every now and then an image or a sound would appear in his mind, like a scrap of skin or gristle floating to the surface. He was used to voices and visions.

A line of brothers emerged from a small gate in the hospital wall and went towards the city. None of them looked at him. The horses that had been standing motionless in the paddock began to graze on the sparse clumps of grass. Two men came from an alley lined with rickety huts. They saw him, and hesitated, but continued towards the strange building.

They were, he was sure, like the one he was looking for.

But neither of them was the one.

This building, then, was their temple. They came here every day, at dawn, to practise the rituals of their kind. He could picture them, shuffling uncomfortably in their borrowed bodies, aware that they

looked small and weak among the translucent pillars and glowing globes of their great hall. How could he see this? He didn't know.

The two men stopped, looked over their shoulders, and then began to run towards the temple. Behind them a gang of boys issued from the mouth of the dank alley. They shouted insults and threw stones. He had met some boys today. Or was it yesterday? There had been ships nearby. Perhaps these were the same boys.

The voices in his head seemed more real than the dull, rain-soaked vista before him. He placed his hand once again on the warm, smooth patch of wall.

I have scanned more widely, in all of the basic dimensions.

And I have made a worrying discovery. It seems that we are not safe here. We will have to make more physical transfers than we have the power to make.

Consternation. Fear. Voices clamouring in his skull. One rising above the rest.

These bodies will last for several tens of planetary sun-orbits. Most are imperfect, and some are diseased, but we took these factors into account when we estimated the power we will require to make the transfers that we will need.

We will need to make more transfers than we estimated.

These bodies will not survive as long as we thought. And the new hosts into which we transfer will also last less long. I know it is difficult to think in a monochronous way.

The inhabitants of this place show no willingness to accept us. Have your scans revealed that they will damage our host bodies?

No. The future, if you understand what I mean by that concept, is even more dangerous than that. In only two planetary sun-orbits from now, a new disease will come to this place, from elsewhere on the planet. The inhabitants, including our host bodies, will have no defence against the infection. The inhabitants will not understand the nature of the disease. They will name it plague. Many will die.

A cacophony of voices. A yearning to be incorporeal once again. Futile anger at being temporally beached on this exposed, storm-racked sandbank.

Did you perceive in your scans when the inhabitants will develop a cure for the disease?

As you know, scanning forward drains the cells, and at a faster rate the more distantly I scan. I have looked ahead for fifty planetary sun-orbits. I can see no indication that the inhabitants have the ability to analyse the disease, still less to create a cure. When it first arrives the plague will kill one-third of the inhabitants of this region. Then it will recur, frequently, although with fewer deaths each time. You can discern our problem: the hosts we now have are susceptible to the plague, as will be any new hosts that we take. We cannot run from the disease, because we cannot leave the module, and we cannot move the module, even in the basic dimensions, until the cells have accumulated enough power. Every time we transfer to new hosts, we use power from the cells. And if, as seems inevitable, we have to transfer frequently, moving from one host to another as each becomes infected with the plague for at least fifty planetary sun-orbits, then we will use up all of our remaining power. We face extinction.

We must leave this place. We have enough power to launch the module.

Perhaps. But not enough to control it in the null dimension, or to materialise it safely. And these host bodies are even less adequate than the Ikshars for survival in null conditions.

Is there no hope, then? Must we wait hew, doing nothing, while the plague infects our hosts one by one until we exhaust our ability to transfer to new hosts?

There is something. I hesitate to mention it, because it seems improbable that it will help. During my scans into this planet's linear future I have also searched its past. The additional expenditure of power was negligible. I have found, close to this location on the planet's surface and only about seventy planetary sun-orbits away, a native who is renowned among his fellows. It seems that his researches are based on rational methods. His writings contain many references to elixir, which seems to be a substance that can cure disease and extend life.

Then let us find him. Where is he now?

You forget that the natives here have short-lived bodies.

He was old when I found him. At this temporal point he no longer exists. And I have found no trace of elixir subsequent to the temporal point at which he died.

Then where is the hope?

The hope is this: we can take the risk of draining the cells a little more, in order to send one of our number to a temporal point when the scientist was living. We can place that individual in a host close to the target. He can then work to complete the creation of elixir. If he succeeds, then this temporal point will alter. Elixir will exist in this temporal location, and we will have a defence against the plague.

Who will go? Self-sacrifice! To be alone among the natives. Separated from the module, he will be unable to transfer to a new host.

If he creates elixir, he may be able to keep his host body alive until he reaches this temporal point. But there is no doubt that the mission is dangerous. We cannot be surprised if none of us wishes to undertake it.

I'll go.

That was the one. That voice. That was the one he was looking for. He would find the owner of that voice.

Prologue Two

Year 3488

‘Good evening, Nyssa of Traken,’ Home said.

The door slid shut behind Nyssa and she leant her back against it. Home had opened a window facing the sunset and the greeting-room was filled with a rust-coloured glow. The air was cool, and lightly scented with jasmine. A baroque cello concerto was playing. All very calming, she thought. And why had Home greeted her by her full name? Did he think she needed reassurance?

‘Good evening, Home.’ Shrugging off her shawl she descended the few steps into the room and put her office on the table. It beeped to indicate that it was talking to Home.

‘The water in the pool is warm, Nyssa, and I’ve prepared the steam-room.’

She smiled. ‘Do I really look that tired? I haven’t had a difficult day.’

‘Lack of stimulus can be as taxing as too much,’ Home said.

‘I’ve had quite enough stimulus for one day. The students are more interested in swapping fashion viruses than they are in technography, and I’ve had face-to-face tutorials all afternoon. I don’t mind them

experimenting with skin pigmentation, Home, but why are they all pale purple? It doesn't suit most of them. Is it just that I'm getting old?'

'Strictly speaking, Nyssa, and as you well know, your cellular structure is safeguarded against degeneration. But I think you'll find a dip in the pool is relaxing.'

'Thank you, Home. I'll go and get out of these clothes.

Weather control decided that today would be humid. It's supposed to be autumn.'

'I did advise you this morning of the forecast,' Home said, his voice following her along the corridor as she walked towards the clothes room. 'I could have compensated for the weather by making adjustments to your fruit juice at breakfast.'

'You know I don't like to change things,' she said as she pulled off her two-piece and threw it into the cleaner.

'Particularly my metabolism. If I keep on adjusting myself, how will I know what I'm really feeling? I like to keep myself as I am. Just as I like to keep you the same.'

Home made no reply, but Nyssa was almost sure he tutted with exasperation. It must be boring for him; she thought, but she really didn't want to come home to find things different.

She delegated some of her research to him, so that he would have something to do while she was at the university, but she was sure he would have been happier redecorating.

'I've filtered the data stream,' Home said. 'Would you like to see?'

Naked, Nyssa padded into the pool-room. 'I'm going to make myself a blue-fish salad, Home. Could you prepare the ingredients? And then tell me the headlines while I'm in the pool.'

The water was at exactly the right temperature. It contained perfume, it was slightly aerated so that it fizzed against her skin, and she suspected that Home had seeded it with exfoliating nanomachines. She rested her head against the cushioned rim and waited for Home to begin the day's report.

'The crisis in the Staktys system has not been resolved,' he announced.

'I'm sorry, Nyssa, but it's been the top story all day. Talks between the Tet-Gen Confederacy and the Jamlinray system were to have resumed today, but were called off because the Tet-Gen autarchs accused Jamlinray of reneging on the cease-fire terms. Conditions in the Staktys system are deteriorating, with reports of widespread famine.

Tet-Gen dependants are fleeing in whatever craft they can find. Some of them are unsuitable for interstellar travel.

Jamlinray has refused to accept that Staktys citizens have refugee status.'

'Stop, Home,' Nyssa said. 'I don't want to hear anymore about it. Heat the water a little. It feels cold.'

'This system has treaty obligations to Staktys, Nyssa,'

Home told her.

'I don't need reminding,' she snapped. 'Sorry, Home. It's just that no one talks about anything else. What's the point? If there's going to be a war, there'll be a war. If it's going to reach us, there's nothing we can do about it. I just want to forget about the whole thing until it happens.'

'Yes, Nyssa.'

It wasn't Home's fault. The Staktys crisis was important: Nyssa knew that. But Home, for all his multibillion-synapse organic circuitry, couldn't appreciate what Nyssa had experienced during the past six years.

She'd left Terminus in a mood of quiet euphoria: she had conquered Lazar's Disease, and had helped to administer the distribution of the vaccine she had developed. It had felt as though she never slept: she had swept from laboratory to makeshift clinic to election meetings, and from one lover to another. And yet she had never felt so alive, so energised.

From Terminus she had ventured out into the galaxy, full of confidence and spirit. And everywhere she went she had found war, hunger, disease. Not because the galaxy was full of disasters, but because she knew how to deal with those that existed. She sought them out.

Each new crisis was a challenge. She threw herself into

microbiological research to defeat a deadly fungus; into knife-edge diplomacy to avert a war; into fund-raising for medical supplies after a flood; and no matter how hard she worked, and how fast she moved, and how little sleep she allowed herself, there was always another crisis waiting to be averted, another catastrophe whose effects she just might be able to ameliorate.

As she sped from one planet to the next, haranguing the crew of each freighter or scout ship she found herself on to make better speed through the interstellar gulfs, it began to seem as though she was no longer racing towards her next task, but fleeing from some relentless pursuer.

On Exanos she had joined a group of volunteers that was attempting to airlift food to Parety, a town surrounded by warlords fighting a vicious civil war. The mission had been successful. And then, on the day that the group had been due to fly out, Nyssa had discovered a teenager in a back street, buying a home-made pulse weapon. He had been paying for it with some of the food Nyssa had helped to bring in. Incensed, she had interrupted the transaction and the boy had run away.

Later, she learnt that he had been shot in a skirmish.

As her little cargo shuttle ascended through the clouds to join its mother ship, radio waves from the planet's surface carried a panic-stricken voice announcing that one of the warlords had carried out his threat to detonate explosives at a nuclear power plant in one of his rivals' territories. The mushroom cloud was visible from the shuttle. Later, from the bridge of the mother ship, Nyssa watched as one city after another, on continent after continent, was annihilated in a slow burst of incandescence.

It had not been the first such discouraging incident Nyssa had experienced. But she was determined that it would be the last. She had no more energy to expend. She had reached the end. She took the first ship away from Exanos, and travelled until she found a planetary system where there was no war, no oppression, no hunger.

And, after a while, she took a post at a university. She taught technography – the study of writings about science – to students who were only a little younger than herself, but who seemed to be entirely innocent of horror and suffering.

She lived alone. She buried herself in teaching and research. She went

walking in the mountains. And gradually she began to feel at peace. It was all she wanted. Sometimes she could even forget, for a few moments, what had happened to her father and her home world. She began to hope that, one day, she would be whole again: her sleep undisturbed by nightmares, her days free from anxiety.

And now the Staktys system was being disputed, and there would be war.

She closed her eyes and sank more deeply into the pool.

She didn't want Home to see that she was almost crying.

'Meriala Keejan left a vid for you, Nyssa,' Home said.

'She's worried about the marks you've been awarding her, and she'd like to meet you to discuss her work.'

Oh, heavens, Nyssa thought; I suppose I'll have to see her.

Why can't they leave me in peace? 'All right,' she said. 'I'd better see the vid. But later, Home.'

'Yes, Nyssa. Professor Nydan would like you to call him.

He didn't explain why.'

Nyssa smiled. She could imagine Home cross-questioning the head of her faculty. Then she sighed. She had been putting off her review meeting for weeks. Nydan had already told her that her assessment result was 'lukewarm', and she assumed that he was being kind. He wouldn't terminate her contract, of course. But Nyssa suspected that his reasons for treating her preferentially were unprofessional: he had told her that he felt paternal towards her, and she thought she knew what that was a euphemism for. He would insist that she went to his study for a face-to-face meeting, and the inevitable awkwardness of the situation would be made even more unbearable by his embarrassment as he struggled to hint at his feelings for her.

'Why can't everyone leave me alone?' she said aloud.

Home made no attempt to reply. The question, Nyssa assumed, was too difficult even for him to process.

Home put the remainder of the data-stream digest on to a screen for Nyssa to read as she ate her fish dinner. After ten minutes she told

him to close the screen and pushed away her plate. 'I'm not hungry,' she said. 'And I can't stand any more news and messages. It's all horrible. Let's get back to the research, Home.'

One of the few changes Nyssa had permitted Home to make was to remove the wall between the conservatory and the study-room. Now she worked in a large, airy space, at one end of which were shelves of books and the communications terminals, and at the other a jungle of plants that spilled out on to the verandah and framed the view of the mountains.

It was her favourite room. Here, uniquely, she felt at peace. Here she could escape into another world: her work.

Her thesis, if she ever published it, would extend the reach of technography into the prehistory of science. Few contemporary technographers, as far as she was aware from Home's searches of recent publications, bothered to study the history of scientific research before the diaspora of humankind across the galaxy. Those few prehistorians who had understood the pivotal role of the planet called Earth tended to begin their studies with the creation of the first datanets and artificial intelligences. Home had found one obscure paper that referred to a time known as the Industrial Revolution. And before that, as far as technography was concerned, there had been no science to write about.

Nyssa's thesis would go half a millennium further back.

She had discovered scientific texts, written by a man in a religious institution but based soundly on empirical evidence and logical thought, from an era that prehistorians had long forgotten.

The thesis would cause a stir, albeit only in the isolated pond of technographical academics. Nyssa would make a name for herself, although this was the least of the reasons why she had undertaken the research.

Her reluctance to conclude and publish her thesis stemmed partly from guilt. She, after all, had an unfair advantage over every other technographer: she had been to Earth in its distant, primitive past.

These days she rarely thought about the Doctor, and the time she had spent travelling with him across all the time and space of the universe. Her childhood on Traken seemed more real, and the memories more valuable; her experiences since leaving Terminus nagged more persistently at her mind. The weird, wonderful and terrifying places

the Doctor had taken her to were, in comparison, like half-remembered dreams.

But she couldn't forget Earth, the Doctor's favourite world, the cradle of galactic civilisation. She had been there in its pre-industrial era, and the more years that passed, and the more she seemed surrounded and contained by instantaneous communications, hyper-light-speed travel and embedded artificial intelligences, the more she longed for that simpler time. A time when people had only the genetic material with which they had been born, could consult no minds cleverer than their own and their neighbours', and could control no more strength than that of their own arms. A time when the most important technologists were the farmer and the blacksmith, and the sum of human knowledge could be written on paper and stored as books in a single building. A time when virtually all the planet's tiny population was engaged in nothing more productive than growing food crops, and virtually all artefacts and structures were made from naturally occurring organic materials.

There were academic disciplines that traced their roots back into those obscure times of parchment, quill pen and subsistence agriculture. Nyssa's counterparts in the philosophy department knew of Aristotle and Hobbes; the teatrologists had access to the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare. But alone among technographers Nyssa had found scientific writings from the prescientific age.

With Home's help, and with increasing excitement, from her communications terminals Nyssa had gone exploring in university libraries, government databases and private collections. Each step, from a footnote to a bibliography, from a bibliography to a citation, took her further back into history.

She had chosen as her subject area the study of light, as she had reasoned that it was one of the few areas of science that was independent of advanced technology. She had progressed steadily until she reached the twentieth century AD, and there she had been unable to find any way forward for several weeks. And then she had found an enigmatic reference, which she would not have bothered to investigate had it not been for Home's almost infinite capacity for research, and discovered the connection that enabled her in a single step to reach back to the thirteenth century AD, and to Roger Bacon, proto-scientist.

She had set Home the task of finding and translating Bacon's many treatises, summoning them from data collections all over the inhabited

galaxy. As Home had gathered them into his datastore, she had read the digests, concerning the scientific elements of the texts, that he prepared for her. And with each page she read she became more intrigued by Bacon, more astounded by the breadth of his work, and more convinced that she was making a breakthrough in technographical studies.

Bacon had been known in his own era as *Doctor Mirabilis*, and the more she learnt about this butterfly-minded, brilliant, vain and irascible man the more he reminded her of another Doctor: the one she had known. His writings on optics and lenses alone might have been enough to prove her thesis: here was a true scientist, who discounted traditional teachings and who based his work on the testing of hypotheses through experimentation and empirical observation. But his theories went beyond the science of optics: while all his works were full of astrology and alchemy, at least in his later books, written towards the end of his long life, he described telescopes, and their uses in taking astronomical measurements, the principles of lighter-than-air flight, the making and uses of gunpowder, and the employment of steam to power ships and vehicles.

Bacon's native nation-state, where he had lived and worked throughout most of his life, had been known as England. Nyssa herself had visited the very same nation-state in its pre-industrial era, in the seventeenth century AD, and early in the twentieth century by which time England had become the foremost technological power on the planet and was at the heart of an empire that spanned the globe. Nyssa assumed that Bacon must have been influential, at the very least, in the gradual transformation of England. But, as she read the few recently published texts about the industrialisation of Earth, she discovered that he and his work had been forgotten. There was not a single reference to him.

The consensus among technographers was that nothing of interest had happened on Earth before the eighteenth century, at the very earliest.

Nyssa felt that her jubilation was entirely justified. Her thesis would push back the dawning of the technological age by five centuries. She had made a real discovery.

'Right, then, Home,' she said, settling into the mobile workstation that enabled her to flit between her desk, the terminals, the bookshelves and the verandah. 'Give me an update on Bacon.'

‘Perhaps you should contact Professor Nydan,’ Home suggested.

‘Later, Home. Or tomorrow. I want to immerse myself in technography this evening.’

‘He has left several messages this week.’

Why was Home being so persistent? Had Nydan said something that Home was reluctant to tell her? That was unlikely. Nyssa knew Home’s methods. He was trying to distract her.

‘You don’t want me to look at your Bacon results, Home.

That’s it, isn’t it? What’s the matter? Haven’t you found anything interesting today?’

There was no reply. Nyssa began to feel worried.

‘Show me the highlights of today’s searches, Home.

Immediately. Put them on screen.’

‘Very well, Nyssa,’ Home said. A holographic rectangle rose vertically into being from the desk in front of her. It filled with text, which began to scroll upwards, faster and faster.

‘Stop!’ Nyssa said. There were dozens of pages. ‘I said the highlights, Home, not every reference. What’s the matter with you?’

‘I’m sorry, Nyssa,’ Home intoned. ‘These are the highlights. There are important points to note in approximately forty-three thousand documents, as far as I can remember.’

‘But that’s almost the entire Bacon datastore,’ Nyssa protested.

She read a few lines from the text Home had frozen on the screen. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, and read the lines again.

She looked at a second reference, and then a third. ‘Scroll down two pages,’ she said. She was aware that her voice was quivering.

She checked more references, scattered throughout the highlighted documents. Each one was essentially similar, and indicated a place in the texts where the wording had changed since the last time Home had scanned the records – the previous day. Hardly any of Bacon’s writings, and none of the subsequent books written about him, were the same as they had been when Home had researched them.

‘What’s going on, Home?’ Nyssa asked. ‘This must be a processing error.’ A sudden wave of anxiety swept over her: perhaps Home’s circuits had been infected, or were deteriorating. When had she last run the diagnostic schedule with him? ‘What do you mean, Home, by “as far as you can remember”?’

There was a silence before Home replied. ‘There is a conflict, Nyssa, between the records in the datastore and the memories in my organic circuitry. It took me some time to recognise the nature of the misalignment. I have learnt, from you, to consider the Bacon data as a resource from which to take evidence in support of your thesis. It was when I looked at the data from your viewpoint that I began to realise that the data had changed. It is perplexing and worrying that I did not notice it until then.’

Nyssa frowned. Home’s untypically gnomic utterances raised more questions than they answered. ‘Is there a processing fault?’ she asked.

‘I don’t think so, Nyssa,’ Home said. ‘I’ve checked my systems, and nothing is wrong. The records in the datastore seem to differ from my memory of them. Nothing is affected apart from the Bacon texts, and that alone rules out a simple malfunction. Of course, I’ve checked many of our records against the sources from which we acquired them. I contacted three hundred archives, each in a different planetary system.

Their texts are the same as those we now have in the datastore.

I can only conclude that my memory, and not the data, is mistaken. Perhaps,’ Home said, and Nyssa could almost hear his circuits buzzing with the effort of explaining the inexplicable, ‘perhaps I have misunderstood the argument of your thesis.’

Nyssa put her hands to her head. Even as Home was speaking, the subject of her thesis seemed to be fading from her mind. She stared hopelessly at the list of citations and text extracts on the screen. They appeared meaningless. Why had she spent five months researching Roger Bacon? Every text she had gathered, whether a transcript of his own writings or subsequent commentaries about the man, told the same story: Bacon had begun his life as a gifted scholar, but had wasted his prodigious gifts on astrology, alchemy, the search for a substance called the Elixir of Life, and other mystical arcana.

Apart from a few early works on lenses and the refraction of light, he had published nothing of interest to a technographer.

Nyssa could hardly believe she had wasted so much time and effort on a nonentity. Her obsession with pre-industrial Earth had blinded her to the pointlessness of her researches.

And yet she was sure she had had a reason for amassing this vast amount of data about Roger Bacon. She had intended to write a thesis – hadn't she? She couldn't remember.

She laughed nervously. 'I'm experiencing something of a misalignment myself, Home,' she said. 'I must have had a reason for researching... ' What was the man's name? Bake?

Haycombe? She shook her head. 'And you must have thought something was amiss, because you took the trouble to highlight these.'

She looked at the screen again. The lines of text on it were becoming unstable, and she could no longer read them.

'Home? The screen's deteriorating.'

'Datastore,' Home said. He seemed to be having difficulty in speaking. 'Data is being altered. Nyssa, all the records concerning your thesis are being altered. Not an internal fault.'

'I can't stop it.' Home fell silent. Nyssa stared at the screen, where the turmoil in the datastore was reflected. The lines of text faded and the screen was blank. New text appeared.

'It's all right, Home,' Nyssa said. 'The screen has stabilised. How's the datastore?'

Home's voice sounded cautious. 'I can detect no errors,'

he said. 'Everything is as I remembered it.'

'Good,' Nyssa said. 'Then let's get on. I don't need to see all this Brunel data. Just show me the highlights of today's research.'

'Yes, Nyssa,' Home said. 'Everything is all right.'

Nyssa stared avidly at the screen, nodding with satisfaction at the new Brunel references and texts Home had unearthed. Isambard Kingdom Brunel, a designer and engineer from the height of Earth's early industrialisation, had built bridges, docks, ships, locomotives and even hospitals. He worked in steel, a new material at the time, and he thought and built on a grand scale. He had never been investigated

technographically: her thesis, if she ever published it, would certainly enhance her reputation. It might even ensure that she remained in her post.

‘Nyssa,’ Home said, gently, ‘it’s late. You have tutorials tomorrow.’

Nyssa stretched her shoulders and massaged her neck.

‘You’re right, Home, as always. I’ve finished with Brunel for today, anyway. I’ll take a shower before I sleep. Can you put something relaxing in the water?’

She stepped out of the workstation and stretched again.

Night had fallen while she had been buried in her Brunel thesis. She walked towards the verandah, and felt the cool night air on her face as the energy field parted before her. The mountains were black, jagged teeth against the dark purple sky; there were other Homes near hers, but they were out of Sight, behind her Home, and the only signs of life were a few isolated lights on the mountain slopes.

Nyssa took a deep breath of the cold air, and shivered.

This was a moment that came every day, and every day she seemed to need to summon more courage to face it. She would have another restless, dream-filled night, followed by another anxious, conflict-filled day, and it seemed impossible that she could get through it all. Only the thought of coming home again and losing herself in her research made the prospect bearable.

She heard a noise behind her. A strange noise, coming perhaps from the greeting-room. She gasped: it was a noise she recognised. A noise she had never expected to hear again.

A grinding, rising and falling noise that was becoming louder.

She stepped back into the study room. The noise stopped.

Then she heard Home, not speaking but making a series of random utterances. She smiled: the materialisation of the TARDIS would be enough to confuse his circuits.

‘Good evening, visitor,’ she heard Home say at last.

‘Hello!’ a voice replied. A male voice, but not an entirely familiar one. Had he changed again since she had last seen him on Terminus?

‘Doctor,’ she called out. ‘In here.’

She heard footsteps approaching. The door was open. He appeared in the doorway. And Nyssa could only stare at him.

He was the wrong Doctor. This was the Doctor as she had first known him, on her home planet. The big, brash, curly-haired Doctor with the toothy grin. The Doctor she had seen fall to his death, or at least to his regeneration, on Logopolis.

How could he have come back?

‘Doctor?’ she said at last.

‘Hello,’ the Doctor said again. ‘Very polite house you have.’ He peered into the depths of the study-room, and then at Nyssa. ‘I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage, young lady. In that you appear to know me, but I’m afraid I don’t...

The old memory’s not what it was. Have we met?’

Nyssa stepped forward and held out her hand. The Doctor, after looking at it suspiciously for a moment, took it and shook it. ‘I’ve met you,’ Nyssa said, ‘but you haven’t met me. Not yet, anyway. That must be it. One of the unusual effects of travelling in time. I’m Nyssa. We met – or are going to meet, in your case – on my home planet -’

The Doctor brandished a warning finger. ‘It’s best I don’t know,’ he said. He grinned. He looked younger than Nyssa remembered him. ‘It’ll come as a nice surprise. I’m very pleased to meet you, Nyssa.’

Nyssa smiled at him, but she couldn’t help remembering the events on Traken. The Doctor was in for anything but a nice surprise. Perhaps she should warn him? She dismissed the idea: she understood enough about the paradoxes of time travel to know that, simply by meeting the Doctor before he had met her she had already caused damage to the currents of events. Time had a way of smoothing out slight eddies, but she suspected that telling a Time Lord how and when he would next regenerate was the kind of disturbance time would find difficult to cope with.

‘Did you travel with me, by any chance?’ the Doctor said.

‘In my, ah, ship?’

Nyssa smiled. ‘The good old TARDIS. Oh, yes, Doctor.

For about two years, I suppose.'

'Excellent!' the Doctor exclaimed. 'I'm sure I'll be glad to have you aboard. When the time comes. You'll know,' he went on, with a lopsided grin, 'that she has a mind of her own sometimes. On this occasion she's landed me a few thousand years, not to mention several thousand light-years, from where I thought I was going. But no doubt she was responding to a summons from you.'

'No, Doctor. I don't think I'd know how to contact you, anyway.'

'How very odd.' The Doctor scratched his head. He gazed at the communications terminals and the shelves stacked with books. 'The TARDIS had detected an anomaly in the time-stream. It related to Earth, so I thought I'd better take a look. I set the controls to take me to the apparent source, and the TARDIS brought me here. I wonder... Are you conducting research, by any chance?'

'Yes,' Nyssa said, excitedly. The sudden appearance of the Doctor, and the intellectual challenge of thinking about the conundrums of time, had banished her weariness. 'I work at the university here,' she said. 'I teach historical technography, and I'm doing research for my thesis.' She felt her face blushing. She told herself it was silly to be ashamed. This Doctor, who hadn't yet met her younger self, had no idea that she had turned her back on advanced practical work in scientific disciplines compared with which technography was a soft option.

'And the subject of your thesis is... ?'

'Isambard Kingdom Brunel, The engineer from Earth's early industrial era,' Nyssa said. 'Of course. That must be it.'

Home and I have been collecting everything we can find about him. The concentration of information must have led the TARDIS... '

She stopped. The Doctor, looking comically disappointed, was shaking his head. 'It's not Brunel,' he said. 'Although he's a suitable subject for your research, of course. He smokes the vilest cigars, by the way. But he's more than five hundred years later than the source of the anomaly. I don't understand it.' He peered at Nyssa, and then once again at the communications terminals.

'Five hundred years,' Nyssa repeated. 'That's deep in the pre-industrial era. There's nothing of interest to a technographer there.' Even as she said the words, she remembered something important. But as she searched her mind for the elusive memory, it dissipated like mist in

the sun.

‘Well,’ the Doctor said, clapping his hands together, ‘it’s been a pleasure to meet you, Nyssa, but it’s clear I’m in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I’d better be on my way.’

We shouldn’t really have met at all, what with our time-lines being asynchronous.’ He was clearly in a hurry to leave, but he hesitated in the doorway. ‘I was just wondering,’ he said, and then paused and looked around the study-room again as if something about it puzzled him. ‘You seem to live very quietly here,’ he said. ‘And before I left the TARDIS I did a bit of checking. This planet, at this time, is remarkably free from strife of any kind, at least for the time being. What I mean is, I hope that when you were travelling with me you didn’t experience... I know things can get rather too exciting, sometimes, when we’re wandering from crisis to crisis in time and space.’ He ran out of words.

Nyssa had felt a cloud of dismay envelop her when she heard the apparently innocuous words ‘at least for the time being’ slip from the Doctor’s mouth. He was obsessive about correcting time-stream anomalies, but hopelessly indiscreet about committing them himself. She managed to summon a smile. ‘It’s all right, Doctor. I had fun on the TARDIS. Most of the time. Some of the places we visited were less than enjoyable, but that’s not why I’m here. You’re right, I suppose. I’m in retreat. At the moment all I want from life is peace and quiet.’

‘Peace and quiet,’ the Doctor repeated, as if the words themselves were as alien to him as the concepts they represented. ‘My view,’ he said, leaning forward and opening his eyes wide, ‘is that you can run – in fact it’s often by far the best option – but you can’t hide. I’ll see myself out.’ He grinned, waved, turned, and walked from the study-room.

Nyssa felt a pang of disappointment. He had gone. She would probably never see him again. And for a while the TARDIS had been her home, and she had been happy in those days. ‘*Doctor Mirabilis*,’ she whispered.

The Doctor’s shaggy-haired head appeared sideways in the doorway. ‘What did you say?’

Nyssa shook her head. She couldn’t quite remember. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Something in a strange language, wasn’t it?’

‘Latin,’ the Doctor said. ‘It was Latin. The language of scholars in

medieval Europe on Earth. How do you come to know Latin? And you said “*Doctor Mirabilis*”. Where did you learn that phrase?’

‘I don’t know.’ Nyssa shut her eyes as she tried to concentrate. ‘I’ve never heard it before. And I don’t know any Latin. Doctor, what’s going on? Why is this important?’

The Doctor held up his hand, as if to restrain her from asking questions. ‘Perhaps you came across the phrase in your research,’ he said.

‘I don’t think so. But I can find out. Home,’ Nyssa said,

‘search the datastore for the phrase *Doctor Mirabilis*.’

‘It’s not there, Nyssa,’ Home replied. ‘I started looking as soon as you said it. There’s something... The phrase seems familiar to me, Nyssa, although I have no record of it. But that’s impossible.’

The Doctor’s deeply furrowed brow cleared suddenly as his eyes widened. ‘I wonder,’ he said. ‘I wonder if the anomaly in the time-stream has affected your research. Now your subject is Brunel. But before the effects of the anomaly came rippling down the stream, perhaps your subject was someone else. Someone earlier. Someone who lived in medieval Europe, and who was of interest to a technographer -

until the anomaly occurred. Someone who was known as *Doctor Mirabilis*: Roger Bacon.’

Nyssa shrugged. ‘I’ve never heard of him.’

‘Of course you haven’t.’ The Doctor was almost shouting, and his face was illuminated with glee. ‘Now perhaps he’s just an obscure scholar who became a Franciscan friar. Perhaps he died young. Perhaps he was never even born. Now no one -

except a Time Lord - has any idea of what he might have become, what discoveries he might have made. You and your home have spent months researching his life and work, but even you now have only a few fading memories. Thank you, Nyssa,’ he added. ‘Now I know I’m on the right track. You were correct: the TARDIS did follow the vector of your research materials. But now, in the real universe, all your Bacon material has been replaced by its equivalent about Brunel. Now, you’ve never been interested in Bacon. Well, I really must be off. To the thirteenth century!’

He was gone. Nyssa pictured him hurrying along the corridors. Although both the study-room and the greeting-room had walls that faced the sunset, she had had Home configure himself so that the route between the two was circuitous. She liked the study-room to be her hard-to-find retreat.

England, Earth, in the thirteenth century AD. Pre-electric.

Pre-industrial. No students to teach. No professors to placate.

No looming interstellar conflict. Just simple tranquillity.

The TARDIS would be sitting in the middle of the greeting-room. Its door would be open: the Doctor was never punctilious about security. She knew the places, deep in the craft's labyrinthine interior, where someone could hide.

'Home,' she whispered. 'Engage the Doctor in conversation for five minutes. Keep him from entering the greeting-room. And make a door, now, quickly, in this wall.'

Chapter One

It was so dark that he could hardly see the path. Twice he had stumbled from it into the freshly turned earth where they had been digging up spring onions, and he could feel mud oozing between his toes and the soles of his sandals. He had a candle burning in a shuttered box, but he dared not show it yet. Here, in I he open gardens and orchards, he felt exposed, and only the night darkness concealed him.

The town walls were a long stone slab of deeper darkness against the starlit sky. To his left was the West Gate, and beyond it the castle on its mount, and to his right the Little Gate: if he showed the flame of the candle the guards on the turrets of either gate, or on the battlements of the castle, could see him if they were awake. Between the two gates, rising from the fabric of the city's defences, was the square bulk of the friary. There was light at none of the windows. But it was possible that someone was awake, perhaps standing in a cell and gazing out over the fields. He didn't dare show the candle flame.

He stumbled on as fast as he dared in the darkness. The town walls rose in front of him. He had almost reached the protection of their black shadow. Once again he had made the trip without being discovered.

He had reached the wooden door in the wall, and was on the point of stepping through the open doorway, into the flickering light, when he saw a cloaked figure standing motionless against the looming stones. Not on the ground, but on one of the marble plinths. And not quite motionless: it was the figure's movement, a slow swaying from side to side, that revealed its presence.

'What's that?' the figure mumbled to himself. He rubbed his hands against his face, staggered a step forward, almost fell from his viewpoint, and then recovered his balance. 'Is that what I think it is? Must tell Oswald about this. But it can't be.

Seeing things. Too much wine, old fellow. Too much wine.

Time for bed.'

It was brother Godwin, and his inebriation was no surprise. Had he seen anything? It didn't matter: Godwin gave no credence himself to the sights he saw when he had been drinking, so there was little likelihood that others would believe him. He'd probably forget all about it by the time he was roused by the matins bell.

Godwin made no move towards the door. The other, becoming impatient, stepped forward into the pool of yellow illumination spilling from the doorway. His sandal struck a pebble, which rolled away and hit the wall. Godwin started, almost fell over, and turned.

'Who's there? Oh, it's you. You gave me a fright. What are you doing out at this unholy hour?'

Damnation. Godwin had recognised him, and seemed surprisingly sober. If he had seen something he shouldn't have seen, he would remember it. And he would remember whom he had met. Now there were few options.

'Give me your hand, brother Godwin. Let me help you down from your perch.'

'Why, thank you.' Godwin jumped from the plinth, with remarkable agility considering his bulk. 'Shall I lead the way indoors?'

'By all means, brother Godwin,' he said, and as Godwin turned towards the door he raised his staff, pulled back the hood of Godwin's cloak, and brought the knobbly handle down on the bald crown of Godwin's head.

It took only two more blows to ensure that Godwin was dead.

Alfric rapped his staff on the floor. 'Pay attention,' he said, and the heads of the students turned reluctantly from the windows and towards him. 'I have no doubt that the events in the street below are of more immediate interest than the teachings of the wise Plotinus, but the latter will over the course of time prove of more value than the former. Montaigne, are you listening to me?'

'Yes, brother. Sorry, brother.'

Alfric sighed. The sons of the nobility were the worst scholars, without a doubt. They were sent to Oxford to receive a veneer of education, but it was clear that most of them felt ill at ease without a horse between their legs and a lance in their hands. Today, though, even the young friars were skittish.

'What is happening in the High Street to distract all of you so completely?' he asked. He strode over to the windows to see for himself.

A crowd had gathered opposite the bookbinder's shop above which Alfric was teaching his class. The street was wide here, at the point where Horseman Lane joined it, but even so people were blocking the thoroughfare, and a line of stationary carts stretched as far as the East Gate and out on to the London road. Scholars, merchants, craftsmen, peasants, serfs and even a few Jews were jostling to see the mountebank who was performing tricks at the centre of the throng.

'It's only a travelling showman,' Alfric told his class.

'He'll get what he can from his gullible audience, and then the bailiffs will have him run out of town.' Nonetheless, Alfric thought, this fellow didn't look like a street trickster. He didn't look like anything he had seen before. He was a tall, strong man, with an expressive face and energetic movements. He was bareheaded, and his hair was curly, long and wild. He was wearing a long woollen coat, dyed brown, that was not in the slightest bit threadbare, and coiled around his neck was a scarf of rainbow colours. His demeanour and the quality of his clothing marked him out as a rich merchant, at the very least.

The showman's accomplice was even more striking. She was a young woman – perhaps his daughter – with chestnut hair as unrestrained as his and even longer. Her attire was even richer than his, and even if the metal and jewels that glittered on her hands, at her neck and in her hair were merely tin and glass they added up to more value than

the jewellery owned by many a merchant's wife.

Her face, her form and her deportment were flawless. She stood demurely beside the showman, smiling slightly as she watched him perform and address the crowd. It was no wonder that Alfric's scholars found the view from the window more arresting than the philosophies of Plotinus.

Alfric shook his head. He had committed two sins. He had looked at the young woman with desire in his heart, and he had been on the point of comparing her to an angel.

Occasionally it was difficult to be a friar, he reflected. And the Franciscan rule was by no means the most rigorous when it came to the enjoyment of life's pleasures.

He returned his attention to the showman. He could hear the man's loud, sonorous voice: he was educated, quite clearly, because although he addressed the crowd in English he peppered his speech with Latin phrases, properly spoken, and even a little Greek. No doubt it was all part of his act. And then Alfric saw the tricks the showman was displaying, and he began to doubt whether the man was a mountebank after all.

Arranged on a trestle table in front of the man were cylinders, cones and circles of polished glass. Alfric had never seen such perfectly made glass: it was so clear that the pieces were almost invisible. And as the man moved along the table he demonstrated to the crowd the refraction of light into the colours of the rainbow, and the use of a lens to make objects seem larger, and to create fire from sunlight.

Alfric was astounded, intrigued and outraged. The science of lenses was no subject for a street show. The great Archbishop Grosseteste, when he had taught at the university, had, by repute, spoken of the properties of polished glass; brother Roger, when he had been a doctor in Paris and here in Oxford, had given demonstrations of his theories on the subject. And at that moment Alfric noticed brother Thomas, brother Roger's young apprentice, in the crowd.

But to make a public spectacle of the purest, most ethereal proofs of the essence of God's creation – it was almost blasphemous. Brother Hubert would have to be told. And no doubt the chancellor would be interested, too.

'He's no travelling showman,' Alfric admitted. 'I can't explain what he is. But throw open me windows, gentlemen.'

Look, listen, and learn.'

Richard had entered the town by the West Gate, under the castle walls, but he had not stopped at the castle. He had been to Oxford before and he knew that once inside the walls he would make slow progress through the narrow streets, even though there was no market that day. He remained mounted on his destrier, with his single pack-horse following behind, and pushed his way through the crowds, from time to time asking the way to the parish of St John.

Eventually he was riding through wider, quieter streets, lined with stone-built houses. He rode into the courtyard of the finest of them, and hailed one of the servants.

'I say! Is this the house of Philip of Seaby?'

The retainer looked round belligerently, realised that Richard had two horses and was wearing livery, and became deferential. 'It is, sir. If you're Richard of Hockley, you're expected. The chancellor said you were to go straight up.'

'Have a heart, man,' Richard said, and swung himself from the saddle. 'I've been riding since dawn. Fetch me a cup of wine, and tell me where the privy is. Between you and me I'm dying for a slash.' He jingled the purse at his belt, and the servant's face lit up with interest. 'Water and hay for my horses, and I'll pay you for your trouble. Leave them in harness: I doubt I'll be stabling them here.'

A little while later, feeling refreshed but nervous, Richard was waiting outside the door of the chancellor's chamber.

Every room in the house – even this small antechamber – had at least one book in it, and Richard had never entirely got to grips with reading. He felt confined between the straight stone walls, and hoped the chancellor wouldn't invite him to stay in his house.

The door opened and the doorway was filled, at least from side to side, with the impressive bulk of the chancellor of the university, Philip of Seaby. He wore the rich robes of a wealthy merchant, his hair was tonsured like a monk's, and his face and his carriage showed the natural arrogance of a nobleman. His person combined the secular, the clerical and the aristocratic.

'Richard of Hockley?' he asked, and didn't wait for a reply. 'Come, come. You have with you your arms and armour, I hope? You might need them.'

‘Of course, my lord,’ Richard said. Damnation! The chancellor was speaking Latin. He should have expected it.

‘Hail, lord,’ he said. That bit was easy. ‘Having been instructed... No, that’s not right. My lord me having instructed you here to attend, that much the more grateful I am... Oh, hang it. Um...’

A thin smile appeared on the chancellor’s broad face. ‘Use English, by the Mass, man. Or French, if you prefer. Whatever you like.’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Richard said. ‘English, then.’ The chancellor had seated himself behind a table strewn with parchments, and Richard drew himself up to his full height before it. ‘Your noble cousin sends greetings, my lord, and has told me to place myself at your service.’

‘Good,’ the chancellor said. ‘You’re here to lead men, not a choral Mass, so as long as your soldiering’s better than your Latin you’ll be useful. How fares my cousin?’

‘I left him sound and unhurt, only three days ago, my lord.

We were camped near the coast with one-third of the King’s forces. The Welsh are quiet now, but for the odd skirmish. We have the island of Anglesey.’ Richard was grateful that the fighting was over: he would have hated to miss it. His lord, Guy de Marenne, the chancellor’s kinsman, was one of King Edward’s chief lieutenants, and along with the rest of the de Marenne household Richard had been campaigning in north Wales since the spring.

‘Well, if you think Oxford’s a cushy posting compared to Snowdon,’ the chancellor said, ‘you can think again. The town’s quiet now, but we’ve had trouble every week since Easter.’

‘Trouble, my lord?’

‘Oxford’s a big town, Richard,’ the chancellor said, ‘and it’s full of people who don’t like each other. The townspeople hate the scholars, for a start. The craftsmen and the lowly traders envy the wealthy merchants. The wealthy merchants resent the influence of the university – and especially me –

and of the religious houses. The friars and monks don’t get along very well with each other. And everybody hates the Jews.’

‘And quite right, too, my lord,’ Richard said. One of the few things he could be sure about was his duty as a knight to protect Christendom

against unbelievers.

The chancellor stared at him. 'The Jews used to keep this town prosperous,' he said, 'until the King outlawed moneylending and then taxed the Jews out of all their property. Who do you think paid for your Welsh campaign?'

'Why, the King, my lord.'

'The King's treasury,' the chancellor said. 'Stuffed with Jewish coin. I'll summon you to my next meeting with the town's rabbi, if you like. You can tell him all about the conquest of Wales. I'm sure he'll be delighted to know that his people have been pauperised in a worthy cause.'

Richard didn't know what to say. 'I'm sorry, my lord. I'm a soldier, not a politician.'

'It's all right,' the chancellor said. He waved a thick arm dismissively. 'You're here to act, not to think. And the first job I have for you is to find and expel a mountebank who's been playing the streets all morning. He's bamboozled the bailiff, but he won't fool me. He calls himself the Doctor.'

Apparently he has a pretty young assistant, who no doubt helps to draw the crowds. He's been seen all over the east end of town. Which means he's not very clever: any idiot would realise that there are richer pickings around Carfax. Anyway, he's causing disturbances, and I'd like to be rid of him. Oh, and one of the Franciscans has gone missing. He'll probably turn up, but as he was one of my, ah, conduits of information about the goings-on in the grey friary, I'd like him to turn up sooner rather than later.'

Richard felt he was on firmer ground at last. 'Those tasks sound easy enough, my lord. I'll start right away.'

The chancellor selected one of the parchments from the table. Richard recognised the de Marenne seal attached to it.

'Guy has written, with the authority of the King, to say that you're to be billeted in the castle. It's convenient for the town, the new keep is comfortable, and the garrison troops will be yours to command. You'll find they're a rough-and-ready lot.'

They need a leader. Oh, and you'll find a kinswoman of Guy's living there: the lady Matilda, Guy's aunt. She's a widow, and somehow Guy

persuaded the King to let her have the castle.

She and her women have taken over the keep. I suppose it's better than leaving the rooms empty. I'll send for you when I need to give you further instructions.'

'Yes, my lord.' Richard was pleased to be in the castle. It was an impressive fortification: moated, with a strong gatehouse, it had a curtain wall with six round towers, one of which, on the highest point of the motte, had recently been rebuilt on the previous king's orders to create a ten-sided donjon of massive proportions. However, a castle was no place for a widowed noblewoman to live. 'Doesn't the King have a palace beyond the north walls of the town?' Richard asked.

'Leased out,' the chancellor said. 'No, the castle is the only royal residence left. Were you hoping for more luxurious accommodation?'

Richard felt himself blushing, and his hand formed a fist where the pommel of his sword would have been if he hadn't left it with his horses. 'Not at all, my lord,' he said. 'I was thinking of the lady Matilda.'

The chancellor laughed. 'How very chivalrous of you,' he said. 'You've been listening to too many Provencal romances, sir knight. Matilda's as happy as a lark in the castle. I'll leave you to discover what she's made of the place. Here's your warrant.'

Richard took the parchment. The interview was over. As he strode back to the courtyard he wondered what transformation his lord's aunt had achieved at the King's castle. He wondered, too, whether the other powers in the town – the mayor and burgesses, and the heads of the religious houses – would be entirely pleased to find that the castle garrison was now, with royal authority, under the command of a knight whose allegiance was to the chancellor of the university.

Such diplomatic niceties were too much for him. His first job was to find the charlatan known as the Doctor, and to kick him out of the town. That sounded simple, and it might even be enjoyable.

Even the Doctor eventually tired of drawing attention to himself. By the time the sun was low in the sky it seemed as though all Oxford's inhabitants and visitors had come to see him perform his marvels, and the crowds were becoming sparse.

Neither he nor Nyssa had asked for payment, but during the day they had nonetheless collected four silver pennies, as well as five eggs, a

dead chicken, two loaves, a tin brooch, a leather belt, a pewter mug, and a large number of small metal badges stamped with images that Nyssa thought had a religious significance.

The Doctor drew his performance to a close, and the small group that had stayed to watch until the end clapped their hands to show their appreciation and then wandered away, shaking their heads in wonderment. One man, dressed in more colourful and less stained clothes than most, stayed long enough to place a penny on the trestle table. 'Amazing,' he said to the Doctor. He turned to Nyssa, looked briefly into her face, and then lowered his head. 'Good evening, my lady,' he mumbled, and backed away.

The Doctor rubbed his hands together, picked up the penny and put it with the others in the pocket of his coat.

'Fivepence,' he said. 'A good day's work. Where shall we set up our stand next?'

'I'm tired, Doctor,' Nyssa said. 'And very hungry. If we're not going back to the TARDIS, we should start looking for somewhere to spend the night. There don't seem to be any hotels.'

'This is an age without commercial travellers,' the Doctor said mournfully. 'I confess I had hoped that by now we would have been approached by someone. I've spent all day demonstrating the properties of prisms and lenses. You would have thought that at least one of the academics here would have been interested enough to offer us hospitality.' He began stowing his display of glass shapes in his voluminous pockets.

'If Roger Bacon is in Oxford,' Nyssa said, 'he can hardly fail to hear about us, even if he hasn't actually seen us in the streets.'

She and the Doctor walked away from the table. When she looked over her shoulder she saw that passers-by were helping themselves to the produce and cheap ornaments the Doctor had left on it.

Nyssa felt she was at last becoming used to being in a medieval town. When she and the Doctor had walked from the TARDIS that morning, through the fields and copses, Oxford had looked serene: from a distance all that could be seen was the great defensive wall, studded with crenellated towers, and rising above it only the highest of the town's roofs and chimneys, the towers of countless churches, the battlements of the castle, and a multitude of plumes of smoke.

Within the walls, however, it had been a chaotic press of people, animals and buildings. The noise and the smells had assaulted Nyssa's senses, and even though the crowds had made way for her she had felt as though she was in danger of being crushed or swept away by the sheer number of people.

She had found herself staring in wonderment at the houses that lined every street. She couldn't comprehend how so many buildings could be constructed in so little space. There wasn't a gap from one end of each alleyway to the other: the houses seemed to have been built on top of each other, and protruding from each other, and overhanging the narrow streets so that in places they almost met above the foul central gutters.

Every narrow frontage was a shop or a workshop, with its windows and doors thrown open to reveal the craftsmen inside, with wares for sale displayed on a table or piled on the street itself. Rolls of cloth, fleeces, animal skins, bowls of spices, boxes of fish, tethered poultry and pigs, pewter plates, loaves and pies, knives, shoes, and whole carcasses of pigs, sheep and goats were stacked, strewn and hung along the entire length of the High Street and the alleys that led from it.

It seemed impossible that there could be room for anyone to walk between the displays, but the streets had been choked –

not only with pedestrians, but also with pack-animals and carts.

At first Nyssa had been so overwhelmed that she could only trot in the Doctor's wake and stand silently beside him wherever he chose to set up his table and display his collection of wondrous glass shapes. She had wanted nothing but to return to the familiar isolation of her Home, and she had spent the first few hours trying to block out the commotion around her as she berated herself for her naivety: how stupid she had been to think that thirteenth-century England would be a haven of peace and quiet.

Then, when she had started cautiously to listen to the voices surrounding her, she had been outraged: in the crowd around the Doctor three young men of an ill savoury appearance were surreptitiously paying more attention to her than to the Doctor's prestidigitation, and were exchanging lewd and coarse comments about her. She had glared at them, and they had appeared shocked that she had understood their words. And then they had bowed their heads and scurried away.

The more she had listened, the more she had realised that she was attracting as much interest as the Doctor. Her clothes and appearance were admired; her provenance was the subject of speculation. Occasionally one of the Doctor's audience would address her, and always with quiet respect.

When she had stowed away in the TARDIS she had hidden in one of the many clothing storerooms and had selected the finest and most colourful garments. She realised that her time had not been wasted. In this society, it was clear, status was indicated by the quality of what one was wearing, and Nyssa was the most expensively dressed woman in Oxford.

It had all felt strangely familiar, and she had started to relax. By the end of the afternoon, when the crowds were thinning, she had been graciously exchanging polite words with the better-dressed of the Doctor's audience.

'Doctor,' she said, as they strolled eastwards along the High Street, away from the commercial bustle and into the relative calm of the university quarter, 'what language have I been speaking today?'

The TARDIS's translation net operated so instantaneously that it required considerable concentration to divorce thought from speech. In her years of travelling with the future Doctor Nyssa had never been able to work out how the net functioned.

It seemed to her, however, that there were differences between the words that issued from her mouth and those that the Doctor used to harangue the crowd.

'That's a jolly good question,' the Doctor said. He pondered for a moment. 'Do you know, I think you're speaking in French. The language of the royal court, if I'm not mistaken. How very odd. Because I'm speaking in English, I'm fairly sure, with occasional lapses into Latin. That's very mysterious.'

It was no mystery to Nyssa. She was, after all, the daughter of Consul Tremas, who had been Keeper-designate of all Traken. There were few women in the galaxy with a pedigree as ancient and noble as hers. It was no surprise then, that when she spoke in thirteenth-century England she should employ the language of the highest aristocracy. And that explained why those she addressed treated her with such deference.

'It feels very familiar,' Nyssa told the Doctor. 'It's like it used to be on

– I mean, when I was a child.’ She saw that the houses at this end of the town, near the East Gate, while simple, were larger than those she had seen elsewhere. The streets were full of groups of boys and young men in uniform liveries. ‘This must be the student quarter. We might find lodgings here.’ As the Doctor made to stride towards the nearest doorway she caught his arm. ‘Let me,’ she said. ‘After all, I speak courtly French.’

There was still no news of Godwin. Oswald paced back and forth: four steps from the window to the door of his cell, and four steps back again. What should he do? It was dusk now, and soon the bell would ring for compline. Every time the friars gathered in the church it seemed to Oswald that Godwin’s absence became more obvious.

Should he go to Hubert and tell the minister that he was worried about Godwin? But then, with his face bruised from the drunken brawl he’d had with Godwin the previous night, would it not look as though he, Oswald, was responsible for Godwin’s disappearance? On the other hand, if he didn’t speak to Hubert, might it not seem strange that he had failed to do so: everyone in the friary knew that Oswald and Godwin were inseparable, drunk or sober.

Perhaps he should go to see the chancellor. The chancellor would know what to do for the best. But then, what if he were not at home? Running across town to the chancellor’s house would look suspicious if Oswald were seen: to make the journey fruitlessly would be a wasteful risk.

Oswald threw himself to the floor and began to pray. But that was futile. He couldn’t concentrate. He touched his bruised eye, and winced.

He would go to compline. He had to be seen there, because his absence would be noted if he failed to attend. He would wear his hood raised, as he had all day except in the privacy of his cell, to conceal the marks of the fight. And then he would return to his cell and pace back and forth in the dark until midnight prayers. He didn’t know what else to do.

Richard ran his quarry to ground in the university quarter.

Having had no time to install himself at the castle, he had left his horses at the chancellor’s house and set off into the streets on foot. However, he had brought with him his sword and one of the chancellor’s servants, and thus equipped he felt confident of being

able to deal with a travelling showman.

He recognised the mountebank from the chancellor's description. He and his female accomplice were standing in the doorway of a house in Kybald Street – probably one of the many houses leased by groups of scholars. As Richard drew closer he could hear that the conversation was about the availability of overnight accommodation.

As he marched up to the door the man turned to face him, and immediately Richard felt his confidence begin to ebb away. He had expected the mountebank to be an unkempt, shifty villain who would attempt to flee when challenged.

Instead he was faced with a tall man, finely dressed, sound of limb and clear of eye, who welcomed him with a grin as bright as the sun.

'Hello!' the man exclaimed. 'I thought someone would come to find us eventually.'

He was clearly no beggar. He hadn't the robes and tonsure of a monk or friar. Perhaps he was a scholar. Richard decided to proceed cautiously. 'I am Richard of Hockley,' he declared,

'and I am charged by Philip of Seaby, chancellor of the university, to arrest you -'

'Excellent!' the man said. 'I'm the Doctor. Pleased to meet you. This is my companion, Nyssa.'

Richard had hardly glanced at the man's accomplice. Now he turned to face her, and found himself struck dumb. By the Holy Cross, she was as fine a filly as he'd ever set eyes on.

The mother of Our Lord could hardly have appeared as sweet, and pure, and perfectly formed. In her richly dyed and embroidered silks and damasks she seemed as exquisite as a jewel. An image flashed into his mind of the dirty, sluttish camp-followers who were the only women he had seen during his months of campaigning in Wales. It was impossible to believe they belonged to the same race as this dainty beauty.

'Good evening to you, Richard of Hockley,' she said.

Instinctively he bowed. She was of noble birth, it was clear. She had addressed him in French. Whoever the lady Nyssa and her servant the Doctor were, they were not shysters or thieves.

‘Good evening, my lady,’ he replied in her language. His lord, Guy de Marenne, spoke little English, and Richard was used to conducting conversations in the language of the court.

And it was easier to speak to her with his face lowered, so that he was not distracted by her luminous green eyes. ‘I apologise for my abrupt intrusion and unmannerly speech. I hope I may be of service to you.’

Richard was surprised to see the Doctor lean forward, as if about to interrupt. Had the fellow no manners? The lady raised her hand in a graceful gesture to forestall him. ‘I’ll deal with this, Doctor,’ she said in elegantly accented English.

That’s put the upstart schoolman in his place, Richard thought. He felt his heart swell as the lady turned her attention once more towards him.

‘The Doctor and I are travelling companions,’ she told him. ‘Please extend to him every courtesy that befits my station, as if he were my kinsman. We have journeyed a great distance, and we have become separated from our servants and horses. We are seeking accommodation for tonight. As you can see, we have the means to pay.’

She lifted her hands, allowing Richard to admire the rings adorning her slender fingers. The Doctor jingled a handful of coins.

It was clear to Richard that there could be no question of putting the lady Nyssa and her scholarly companion outside the town walls. Whatever they were, they were not beggars.

And if they were to stay in Oxford, it was better for them to be in a place where he could keep his eyes on them: he still had suspicions about the Doctor, and as for the lady Nyssa – well, she was simply a feast for his eyes and senses. He realised that he had already decided to serve her: she was without her own servants, he reasoned, and she needed a valiant knight on whom she could depend.

Perhaps he should invite them to the chancellor’s house? It was nearby. But would the chancellor object?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of running feet. The chancellor’s servant tugged at his sleeve. ‘It’s Edwin, sire. From the master’s house.’

Another of the chancellor’s servants was running along the darkening

street. 'Sire!' the servant called, and spoke between panting breaths. 'The master says to go to the Franciscan house at once. The missing friar isn't missing any more. He's been found. And he's dead.'

'Christ's nails!' Richard swore. 'I beg your pardon,-my lady,' he added. He wasn't used to female company, but he didn't want the lady Nyssa to think he was uncivilised. 'I'm sorry, my lady, but as you can see I have been called away. I'll return as soon as I can to attend you.'

'That won't be necessary,' the Doctor said. His face had on it a smile so wide that it seemed to encompass both Richard and Nyssa. 'We're coming with you. We wouldn't miss this for the world, would we, Nyssa?'

Chapter Two

Despite Richard's protests, Nyssa and the Doctor had followed him. The Doctor had had no difficulty in keeping up with the knight's marching pace, but Nyssa had thought it would be undignified to run, and so she had allowed the two servants to escort her as she made a more stately progress.

The Franciscan friary was at the west end of the town, where the castle walls reared up against the red embers of the dying sunset, and Nyssa had begun to think she would faint with exhaustion and hunger as she was led along the filthiest, smelliest alleyway she had yet encountered, through the Jewish quarter with its once-proud houses daubed with mud and slogans, past a row of shops that, by their odour, she deduced were fishmongers', and into an area crammed with religious buildings and divided by high stone walls.

The streets were narrow and the shadows were deep and dark. Despite the company of the chancellor's servants Nyssa began to feel nervous. Then she heard Richard's voice, raised in anger, ahead of them.

'Psst!' said a voice from the shadows beside her. It was the Doctor.

'What's going on?' she asked, gratefully huddling beside him. The servants hesitated and then went on to find Richard.

'I thought it best not to make an appearance just yet,' the Doctor said. 'Our young knight seems to be having difficulties. Didn't want to exacerbate the situation.'

That makes a change, Nyssa thought. She could hear the argument that was taking place round the corner.

‘I say again, sir knight,’ a firm, confident voice said, ‘that this is entirely an internal matter. One of our friars fell, he struck his head, and he has died from the wound. I do not doubt that you have the authority of the chancellor to supervise the orderly conduct of the town. This unfortunate accident, however, does not fall within your remit.’

‘For my part, minister, I do not question your account of the incident.’ Nyssa could hear the tension in Richard’s voice as he tried to remain diplomatic. He wasn’t very good at it. ‘I am merely trying to do the chancellor’s bidding. He has told me to find out what happened to friar Godwin. Once again I must ask you to let me in.’

There was a short sound, like metal being scraped across stone. Richard had started to draw his sword.

Nyssa sighed. Why was it that wherever she went there was conflict and violence? ‘This has gone far enough,’ she said to the Doctor, and stepped out from the wall and round the corner.

In front of her was the high wall of the friary precinct, and beyond it the towering bulk of the friary itself. In the pool of yellow light spilling from the open doors of the gatehouse eight figures stood in a tableau. Richard, with his hand on the pommel of his sword and the two servants standing nervously behind him, was faced by a line of five robed friars standing across the wide doorway.

‘Gentlemen,’ Nyssa said, ‘there must be a peaceful way to resolve this.’

‘I’m sure there is,’ the Doctor added, as he followed her towards the confrontation. ‘I’ll take a look round for you,’ he whispered to Richard, ‘once I’ve invited myself in.’

The friars lowered their heads and stepped back as Nyssa approached.

‘This is no place for you, my lady,’ Richard told her. ‘I beg you to remain at a distance.’

‘And I agree,’ the eldest of the friars said. ‘I am Hubert, my lady, minister of the Franciscan brotherhood of Oxford. I beseech you to remove yourself from this dangerous place.’

He glanced at Richard’s sword as he said this, but his gaze returned to Nyssa and his brow creased in a frown. He was clearly trying to decide who the young noblewoman could possibly be.

‘And I’m the Doctor,’ the Doctor declared. ‘Nyssa and I have come to pay you a visit.’

This announcement was so unexpected that it had the effect of ending the dispute between the knight and friars.

Everyone, including Nyssa and the servants, stared speechlessly at the Doctor. Nyssa saw one of the friars lean towards Hubert and whisper in his ear. Hubert nodded.

‘We’ve come to see brother Roger,’ the Doctor told Hubert. He spoke slowly, as if addressing a child. ‘Roger Bacon, the teacher. He is here, isn’t he? I’m sure he’s supposed to be.’ He cocked his head, as if listening to a far-off sound. ‘It is AD 1278, isn’t it?’ he asked Hubert conspiratorially. ‘Yes, I’m sure it is. Brother Roger invited us, you see. We have interests in common. So much to discuss. If you’ll just direct us to his cell?’ He pulled Nyssa towards him and made as if to push through the line of grey-robed friars.

Hubert stood firmly in the Doctor’s path. ‘What are you thinking of?’ he demanded. ‘I can’t admit a woman within the friary walls. And as for your supposed invitation from brother Roger: I find it exceedingly unlikely. Roger has been unwell for many months, and sees hardly anyone. Brother Thomas, it’s fortunate that you are here. I’m sure you would know if brother Roger had issued any such invitation.’

Nyssa looked at the friar whom the minister had addressed as Thomas, and realised that the tall, heavily built figure was a mere youth. His face was marred by pimples, and his circle of black hair was thick and greasy, but his eyes were alert and burned with a strange intensity.

‘Yes, minister,’ the young friar said in a surprisingly deep voice. ‘I believe that brother Roger has invited a scholar – a teacher known only as the Doctor.’

‘And that’s me,’ the Doctor said cheerfully. He and Nyssa exchanged a glance: he had, to the best of Nyssa’s knowledge, received no such invitation.

Hubert and the friar who had whispered to him conferred privately for a few moments, and then both men stepped forward.

‘It seems, Doctor,’ Hubert said with a smile, ‘that I have no alternative but to welcome you to our house. Brother Alfric here, the proctor of our house, will attend to you shortly.’

However I hope you understand, my lady,' he added, inclining his head towards Nyssa, 'that our rules prevent us from extending the same hospitality to you. Please excuse us for a moment while we consider the necessary arrangements.'

Hubert led all the friars into the gatehouse, where Nyssa could see them talking animatedly. Richard, the Doctor, Nyssa and the chancellor's servants were left standing outside the friary walls, where they began their own discussion.

'This is all very well, Doctor,' Richard said, 'but I am still denied access to the friary. The chancellor will not be pleased.'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' the Doctor replied. 'I'm as keen as the chancellor is to investigate the circumstances of the friar's death. I'm rather good at that sort of thing. And I'll tell you everything I discover. It's clear you're not going to be allowed in tonight. The problem is that Nyssa can't come with me, either.'

Richard clapped his hand to his head. 'Forgive me, my lady,' he said. 'I am a rude and uncivil knight. You must have shelter for the night. That is my first concern.'

He was red-faced and flustered. To reassure him Nyssa smiled, and placed her hand on his sleeve. She felt him start with surprise. He stared at her hand as if it was an unnervingly large spider.

'The chancellor's house,' he blurted. 'No. Of course.'

That's it. My lady, I am to stay at the castle. I have the King's permission. The donjon is large and richly appointed, I have been told. There could be no objection to you spending the night there, under my protection.'

The words had no sooner left his lips than he gasped with horror at what he had said. His face burned crimson.

'My lady, please, I meant no disrespect. The castle is the home of the widow Matilda, my lord's aunt. You would be her guest, not mine. I didn't mean that we would share – Oh, my lady, I'm sorry.'

'It's all right, Richard,' Nyssa said. She concentrated on making the words come out in the knight's native language.

She thought it would help to calm him. 'I thank you for your concern,' she went on, reverting to the courtly language the Doctor had called

French.’ ‘Your offer is gentle and considerate. The royal castle is, I think, the most appropriate place for me to reside, and I look forward to meeting your lord’s.kinswoman. You may escort me there.’

‘Thank you, my lady,’ Richard said.

He’s quite sweet, Nyssa thought, in an uncouth sort of way. But I wish he’d stop staring at me as though he’d never seen a woman before. And it can’t be that he isn’t used to talking to aristocrats.

She shook her head. She was too tired to concern herself with Richard’s behaviour. The Doctor, as was his habit, seemed to be heading directly towards the site of a violent death, and she was relieved that she couldn’t go with him.

She felt the Doctor grasp her arm. He drew her away and whispered, in a voice Nyssa was sure was loud enough for Richard to hear, ‘Are you sure you’ll be all right with that testosterone-fuelled soldier?’

Nyssa shook her arm free. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘He hardly dares to look at me. I find the social organisation here very familiar, Doctor. And, from what I remember of the time I spent travelling with you, the safest place is always a long way from wherever you are.’ She sighed. ‘I’ve had enough of violence and sudden death, Doctor. I came here to get away from all that. I’ll be safe in the castle.’

‘Well, if you’re sure,’ the Doctor said. He grinned. ‘That’s settled, then. I still don’t like leaving you. But you see, I have to find out what’s going on among the Franciscans. Roger Bacon is one of the friars, and he’s at the end of the time-line disturbances that the TARDIS detected.’

Nyssa frowned. ‘Yes, I’m beginning to remember. I suppose that’s because we’re back where it all started. My thesis wasn’t about Brunel, was it? Not to begin with. It was about Bacon. The proto-scientist. And then it changed, because he wasn’t a scientist: just a medieval philosopher obsessed with alchemy and the Elixir of Life.’

‘From this point in time,’ the Doctor said, ‘those are just two of a literally infinite number of possible futures. And I have to find out what caused the change you detected. Many of the possible time-lines indicate that in this year Bacon was imprisoned, by his own order, the Franciscans, and that he did little subsequent work. That’s why I brought the TARDIS

here, now.’

‘Imprisoned,’ Nyssa said. She hated to think about it, but she couldn’t stop her brain considering the problem. ‘I wonder if he killed brother Godwin.’

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor said grimly. ‘Or perhaps he was found guilty, whether he did it or not.’ He made a screwed-up face, and then grinned. ‘It’ll be like searching in a haystack,’

he said cheerfully, ‘without even being sure that I’m looking for a needle.’

He turned away. Hubert and Alfric had emerged from the gatehouse, and were beckoning to him.

‘I’ll come to see you as soon as I can,’ the Doctor said. He nodded towards the high keep that was silhouetted against the last of the evening’s red light. ‘I think I’ll be able to find you.’

As he led the Doctor through the vaulted corridors of the friary Alfric mulled over the instructions Hubert had given him.

First, he was to look into the circumstances of brother Godwin’s death and, if possible, conclude that Godwin died as a result of an accident. That outcome was, after all, the most likely, and it would be the least embarrassing for the friary and the entire order.

In the unlikely and unfortunate event of Alfric finding evidence of foul play, he was to find a way of implicating brother Roger. This would give Hubert a pretext for having the old man’s cell searched again.

Finally, Alfric was to keep close to the Doctor. The sudden appearance in Oxford of this eccentric but obviously educated stranger worried the minister. Alfric was to keep the Doctor away from brother Roger for as long as possible and, if that meant the Doctor had to accompany Alfric as he went about his other duties, then that was how it would have to be.

Hubert had excused Alfric from attending compline in the church, and so Alfric had taken the opportunity to show the Doctor round the friary while it was deserted. As they emerged from the cell he had allocated to the Doctor, they caught sight of the tardiest of the friars hurrying along the corridors towards the church.

They were crossing the little cloister when the bell in the church tower started to chime. Alfric dropped to his knees.

‘I say,’ the Doctor said, leaning over him, ‘are you all right?’

Alfric opened one eye. ‘I’m praying,’ he said. ‘It’s good for the soul. Will you not join me?’

The Doctor looked momentarily uncomfortable. ‘It’s not my custom,’ he said. ‘In my order we pray only in private.’ He sauntered away, whistling tunelessly. Alfric entertained several uncharitable thoughts before returning to his meditations.

After a few moments he stood and brushed down the front of his habit. ‘Come along, Doctor,’ he said. ‘The wine cellar’s down these stairs. I prayed for you, too, by the way. And for brother Godwin, of course.’

‘Thank you,’ the Doctor said, following him down the wide stone stairs. ‘I don’t often get prayed for. Was Godwin’s body found down here?’

‘I’ll show you,’ Alfric said. The Doctor, he thought, had a careless attitude towards the wellbeing of his immortal soul.

As they descended into the lightless lower levels the flaming torch in his hand cast dancing shadows on the walls. Was the Doctor so confident of his purity that he had no need to consider his sins? And surely that, in itself, was sinful? Or could it be that the Doctor was so steeped in worldliness that he considered prayer futile?

The Doctor claimed to belong to a religious house, even though his hair was not tonsured and he wore no habit. But membership of a holy order, Alfric knew from looking at those around him and into the depths of his own soul, was no guarantee of holiness.

‘This is the door,’ he said, holding the torch high. ‘That way, there are other cellars, and the corridor ends in a stairway up to the kitchen and bakery. In this direction there is the door that leads to the friary’s fields outside the town walls, and beyond it a stairway leading up to the brothers’ cells.’

‘It’s a gloomy place,’ the Doctor said, and his voice echoed sepulchraly from the stone walls. ‘No natural light, even during the hours of daylight. Not usually a busy thoroughfare, this corridor?’

‘I’ll light more torches when we’re inside the cellar,’

Alfric said. He had no superstitious fear of the dark, but he found

these subterranean corridors unwelcoming. ‘You’d find brothers down here at any time during the day,’ he said,

‘between prime and compline. Fetching food and drink from the cellars, putting fresh and dried victuals into the stores. At night, though, it’s deserted. Except for those friars with a weakness for food or liquor, and keys to the cellar doors.’

‘Brother Godwin had a set of keys, I take it?’

‘He often worked in the kitchens,’ Alfric said. ‘We found a ring of keys on the rope around his habit.’

‘Is he still in there?’ the Doctor asked, raising his eyebrows and nodding towards the doorway.

‘Brother Godwin is with his maker,’ Alfric replied. ‘His bodily remains have been laid out in the north chapel.’

‘I see,’ the Doctor said. He beckoned to Alfric to bring the torch into the arched doorway and, by the flickering light, he inspected the wooden door, the doorframe, and the threshold.

What was he looking for, Alfric wondered. ‘We had to break down the door,’ he said. ‘Godwin had bolted it.’

The Doctor merely murmured and, on his hands and knees, continued to peer at the long flagstone at the foot of the door. ‘How many people have been into the cellar since Godwin was found?’ he asked.

‘Only myself and two of the brothers,’ Alfric replied.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Oh, just idle curiosity,’ the Doctor said, standing. ‘Shall we go in?’

They had to lift the door out of its frame in order to enter.

The Doctor dropped to his knees immediately and began inspecting the floor as keenly as a gleaner in the fields after the harvest.

Alfric had by now understood the reason for the Doctor’s bizarre behaviour and questions: he was using Alfric’s remembered observations, and his own study of the physical signs of activity in the cellar, to construct an image in his mind of the events that had taken place. Alfric, who had been a mason before joining the Franciscan brotherhood, knew that the building of a house, or the carving of a

pillar, could be prefigured in a drawing. He was surprised to find a scholar –

and one with the exalted title of doctor – displaying an aptitude for practical arts. This Doctor, he told himself, would have to be carefully watched. And, because he now understood the Doctor's methods, he tiptoed around the shadowy edges of the cellar as he lit the torches that were set into niches in the walls.

'Thank you,' the Doctor said, looking up. He surveyed the rows of barrels. He looked again at the floor. 'Where was Godwin found?'

'There,' Alfric said. 'By the front of the second barrel in the third row. I saw his blood on the tap. His head must have hit it as he fell.'

'Do you think so?' the Doctor asked. He lowered his head almost to the floor and squinted along an imaginary line from the doorway to the barrel Alfric had pointed out. He nodded, and stood up. 'How did you remove his body?'

'We used a stretcher, Doctor.' Alfric thought that he was beginning to see the thread that joined all the Doctor's strange questions, but before he could follow it the Doctor had turned and was looking closely at the door.

'Bolted,' the Doctor said. 'But not locked?' He slid the metal bolt back and forth.

'Godwin might have locked the door from the inside,'

Alfric said. 'But I can't tell how many brothers might have tried the lock, and in doing so unlocked it from the outside. All I know is that when I ordered the door to be broken down we found it bolted but not locked. But, Doctor,' he went on, 'the fact that the door was bolted makes it plain that brother Godwin died here alone. The door can be locked, and unlocked, from either side. But it can be bolted only from within.'

'Yes,' the Doctor said slowly. 'That appears to be the case.' He turned from his inspection of the door and gave Alfric a wide smile. 'And that's what makes it all so interesting.'

A sudden chill thought occurred to Alfric. He gazed at the barrels. The largest were taller than a man. If Godwin had been involved in a fight, his opponent could have remained hidden among the barrels until the door had been broken open.

He could be in the cellar even now.

But no. Why would Godwin's killer remain with the body when he could simply unbolt the door and flee? Alfric smiled at his imaginings: the Doctor's unusual way of thinking had begun to affect his own thoughts.

'Exactly,' the Doctor said, as if he had been able to see into Alfric's mind. 'Why would he stay? But if he didn't, how did he leave? I've seen enough. Would you extinguish the lights before we go? And we'd better make sure that nobody else enters this room. Your minister might like to see what I've discovered here. I think it's time we went to see brother Hubert.'

'I had a feeling that would be your next request,' Alfric said.

Women. They were all a mystery to Richard. The coarse, rude serf-wives who worked his lands at Hockley; Alice, the merchant's daughter, who had let him kiss her at the fair on Bartholomew's Day but had then married a journeyman butcher; even the Queen herself: he didn't understand them.

The lady Nyssa was more confusing than most of her sex.

She could ride, for one thing: she'd mounted his pack-horse as nimbly as a knight eager for battle. She'd tucked up her skirts and straddled the beast's bare back. He'd never seen a lady do anything like that.

And how old was she? Whenever he tried to look at her he found her returning his gaze, and he had to look away. But she wasn't as young as he had thought at first. Perhaps she was not still unmarried. Perhaps she was widowed. Perhaps – and he prayed to the saints that it was not the case – she had a husband still living. Somehow she had retained the bloom of youth: fair skin, bright eyes, a slender form. He forced himself not to make a sum of her parts: the pleasure it gave him was, he was sure, not pure.

His destrier was ambling through the dark, deserted streets, but it was still drawing ahead of the pack-horse. He spoke softly to it, and it stopped. He waited for Nyssa to reach his side.

Having sent the chancellor's servants back to their master's house to prepare the horses, he and Nyssa had walked in uncomfortable silence all the way from the Franciscan friary to the chancellor's house. Nyssa had seemed almost too faint with tiredness to make the journey, and several times he had been on the point of catching her in his arms. But

he hadn't dared to touch her.

However, tired though she seemed, in the chancellor's forecourt she had greeted the pack-horse and climbed on to its back with ease.

And now, as he watched her approach, and the details of her pretty heart-shaped face appeared out of the night, he wondered whether she was not tired but careworn. She looked sad. And Richard felt his heart swell in his chest almost until it choked him.

She was fair, and noble, and elegant, and not afraid of the dark. And she was a horsewoman. She was, in short, perfection. Richard silently vowed that he would spare no effort to protect her.

'This is Carfax, my lady,' he said, indicating the place where the two widest streets in the town met at the crossroads.

'Not far to go. There's the castle.' He pointed along Great Bailey, the street that ran as straight as an arrow from Carfax to the main gate of the fortress.

Side by side the horses clopped slowly along the street.

Once they had passed the church of St Peter-le-Bailey the street widened and the houses were fewer and smaller, as if they had drawn back in awe from the looming bulk of the castle.

At the end of the street Richard stopped to orient himself.

In front of him was a bank of grassy earth, beyond which lay the castle's encircling moat. There was a light to his left: that must be the barbican. He urged his steed on, at a slow walk, and led Nyssa's horse alongside the bank. A wooden bridge took them on to the small island on which the barbican stood.

They passed unchallenged through a vaulted corridor between two towers and emerged on to a second bridge below which ran the main channel of the moat. The twin towers of the inner gatehouse reared above them, and in the open gateway stood a sentry wearing the King's livery and carrying a halberd.

'Richard of Hockley,' Richard announced as he rode across the bridge.

'We're expecting you, sire,' the sentry said. 'The chancellor sent word.' He peered curiously at Nyssa.

‘A guest for the lady Matilda,’ Richard said. ‘Go and tell one of her women to prepare a chamber. And have someone ready to see to the horses.’

‘Of course, sire,’ the man said. He propped his weapon inside the gateway and ran into the darkness.

As the horses climbed the circuitous path that wound between the outbuildings and yards of the inner bailey towards the blunt thick tower of the keep, Richard shifted in his saddle and looked around him. It had been some years since he had last been inside these fortifications, and he sensed that they had been altered in some way. He shrugged. Daylight would reveal any changes.

He stretched his limbs. He had not rested since setting out from Gloucester at dawn, and he felt that if he didn’t get to a bed soon he would fall asleep in the saddle. The one advantage of arriving late at the castle was that the lady Matilda would already have retired. Richard knew that the courtly rituals of exchanging greetings and introducing Nyssa would be beyond him tonight.

He looked over his shoulder. Nyssa would be given a room near to Matilda’s. He wondered where he would be installed, and whether he would be close to Nyssa.

Hubert had arranged to meet the Doctor in the friary’s scriptorium. It was a small room, as few of the brothers were skilled at copying manuscripts, but larger than any cell. Hubert was sitting behind the master copyist’s table, in a tall chair that added to his considerable height; the Doctor, sitting opposite him, had only a low stool. The candles had been positioned to illuminate the Doctor; Hubert’s face was in shadow, but the candlelight gleamed on the dome of his hairless head and on the curved line of his strong nose.

Alfric, standing by the door, watched the two men watching each other. The Doctor seemed unworried by the long silence or by being appraised: he glanced along the shelves of books, nodding in apparent recognition as he discerned their titles. He flashed his brilliant teeth at Hubert, and then at Alfric. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

Open-air preaching; no conspicuous wealth; an interest in scholarly learning; and a cheerful disposition. With these characteristics, Alfric thought, the Doctor would make a good Franciscan. From his brief knowledge of him, however, Alfric doubted that he had the necessary religious conviction and willingness to obey rules.

‘Greetings, Doctor,’ Hubert said, with heavy and ironic emphasis on the Doctor’s title. He was speaking in Latin, Alfric noted, no doubt to test the extent of the Doctor’s learning. ‘Welcome to the Oxford house of the Franciscan order. I hope brother Alfric has been attending to you?’

‘Indeed he has!’ the Doctor exclaimed. ‘He has found me a charming little cell. You wouldn’t call it comfortable, but then I can do without comfort. If I really have to.’

Alfric was amazed at the fluency of the Doctor’s speech.

He had never before heard Latin spoken conversationally. The language of learning, writing and prayer came from the Doctor’s mouth as easily as English came from that of a horse-dealer.

‘Good,’ Hubert said. He had reverted to English. The Doctor had passed the test. There was another long silence.

The Doctor leant forward and laid a finger on the tome lying open on the table in front of Hubert. ‘*The Consolations of Philosophy?*’ he asked.

Alfric saw a slight smile twitch on Hubert’s lips. ‘The tribulations of accountancy,’ he replied. ‘I sometimes think that to be minister of a friary one needs to know as much about arithmetic as about the scriptures and the lives of the saints. If I were in charge of a parish I would receive income in the form of corn, chickens and sides of meat. Much easier to deal with than rents from lands and houses. I thank the saints we have Alfric as our proctor. But do you know Boethius?’ he added, returning to the subject of philosophy.

‘Never met the fellow,’ the Doctor replied, and before Hubert and Alfric had time to puzzle over his words he said,

‘Brother Godwin was murdered, I’m afraid. Or at least, he didn’t die in the wine cellar.’

‘Is that so?’ Hubert said. Alfric smiled. It was not that easy to distract the minister. ‘Well, no doubt that’s why you needed to see me so urgently, in the middle of the night. And now that you’ve succeeded in keeping me from my prayers and my accounts, we have plenty of time to discuss things. For instance: what are you, Doctor?’

‘What am I?’ the Doctor repeated. ‘Oh, you know. A bit of this, a bit of that. Water, proteins, complex carbohydrates.’

Slugs, snails, puppy-dogs' tails. Jack of all trades, and master of -'

'A master of obfuscation, clearly,' Hubert said impatiently. 'You're not of noble birth. You wear no livery, so I presume you are not attached to the household of a lord. You are educated, which means that once you, or your family, must have had great wealth or been in a holy order. But there is no evidence of either wealth or religious devotion now. Nor do you practise a trade. I repeat: what are you?'

Hubert's questions evidently irritated the Doctor. 'I'm just me,' he said. 'I don't fit into any of the categories you have available.' He threw his arms into the air and then folded them across his chest with finality and glared at Hubert. Then his face lit up and he raised a finger, 'If it makes it easier for you,'

he said, 'I am a member of a contemplative house. The Prydonian order. You won't have heard of it. We're terribly reclusive. I'm one of the very few peripatetic, mendicant members.'

'You're quite right, Doctor,' Hubert said. 'I've never heard of it. What makes you think Godwin was murdered?'

A sudden change of subject was one of Hubert's favourite tactics, whether in the schoolroom or the pulpit. Alfric was fascinated by the verbal sparring between the two men.

'Something heavy - for instance, a friar - was recently dragged into the wine cellar. If you send someone to look at Godwin's remains, I think you'll discover that the backs of his heels, and the heels of his sandals, are grazed from being dragged along. And you should take a look at his head, too: if there's more than one wound, it's unlikely that he died as a result of a fall.'

'The door was bolted from the inside, Doctor,' Hubert pointed out, 'and brother Godwin was found alone.'

'Then whoever put his body in the wine cellar was jolly clever. Why on earth would Godwin have bolted the door when he had a key with which he could have locked it, and that he must have used to get in?'

'And you were invited here by brother Roger?' Hubert said, changing the subject again. 'May I see the letter?'

The Doctor placed his hands in the pockets of his coat and rummaged in them for some time. 'Sorry,' he said at last, 'I seem to have mislaid

it. What a pity.'

Another silence descended. The minister and the Doctor stared at each other.

'I'll be blunt with you,' Hubert said at last. 'Roger Bacon is, as you know, one of the most celebrated of the Franciscan brotherhood. He has taught not only here in Oxford but also in Paris. He is known in Rome, and I suspect that he has corresponded with the Holy Father. He is, without doubt, one of the foremost philosophers of our time. When he joined us, twenty years ago, it was thought that his learning and his reputation could only be to the benefit of the friary and the entire Franciscan order.'

'But?' the Doctor prompted.

'But times change, Doctor. It's no secret that the Dominicans are our rivals, in this town and throughout Christendom. They would like to be able to reveal heresy among our brothers. Therefore we have to be on our guard.'

And brother Roger is – how shall I put this – not the most diplomatic of men. As a young man he spent his family's wealth on his experiments and speculations. As a grey friar he has taken a vow of poverty, and has devoted his life to prayer and preaching. I suspect that he still has money and possessions, and that he continues with his speculative writings. His preaching was so unconventional that long ago he was forbidden to continue. His infrequent lectures are full of wild ideas. In short, he is a liability.'

'I see.' The Doctor looked thoughtful. 'You're worried, then, that my visit might encourage his unhelpful behaviour?'

Hubert nodded.

The Doctor beamed. 'Then I can put your mind at rest. I am concerned for Roger Bacon's wellbeing, certainly, but I share your concern about the direction of his studies.'

Alchemy, astrology and philosophical speculation are not appropriate areas of research for him. And I can assure you that if I have any influence over him at all, I'll do my best to steer him away from those subjects.'

Hubert studied the Doctor's face. It seemed to Alfric that the minister was trying to decide whether he could trust the Doctor's word. 'Will

you swear an oath to that effect, Doctor?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I swear it by the Sash of Rassilon,’ he said gravely. ‘The Sash is the holiest of the relics preserved by my order.’

Hubert sighed, ‘Then that will have to do. Very well, Doctor. Tomorrow you will meet brother Roger. Brother Alfric will accompany you. Alfric, you’d better tell brother Roger to expect a visitor. I hope you will join us for midnight prayers in the church, Doctor. Until then I advise you to remain in the cell we have given you. Alfric, take the Doctor to his room. And then go to the north chapel and inspect brother Godwin’s remains for the signs the Doctor mentioned.

I have a terrible foreboding that the Doctor will prove to be correct. If murder’s been committed, we won’t be able to keep the chancellor out of it. I just hope the chancellor can keep the mayor at bay.’

Thomas closed the door firmly before Alfric had a chance to extend the conversation. He turned, leant his back against the wooden barrier, and shut his eyes. He allowed himself to smile.

There was nothing in the cell that could be of interest to the proctor, but on principle, Thomas always did his best- to keep Alfric’s nose out of brother Roger’s affairs. It gave him a shiver or pleasure to stand up to Alfric. Before Thomas had attached himself to Roger Bacon, as pupil, protector, servant and helper, he had been, he seemed to remember, a timid fellow. Now he had a purpose in his life, something more than prayer and learning, and he felt stronger and abler than before.

He opened his eyes, lifted the candle in his hand, and by its light surveyed the room. It was a large cell – larger even than the other cells designed to accommodate two brothers. It had been brother Roger’s for as long as anyone could remember, and its size reflected the esteem in which its occupant had once been held. Since Thomas had moved in he had done little to tidy the mounds of books, papers, charts and old experimental instruments, the residue of Roger’s years of studies.

Brother Roger was awake. The old man, as thin and brittle as a twig, was sitting on his bed with his knees drawn up to his chin. His eyes were wide, and his mouth was moving as if he was silently praying.

Shielding the candle flame, Thomas strode across the room. Brother Roger started and recoiled as he approached.

These days the old man was frightened of everything.

‘The Doctor wants to see you,’ Thomas announced. ‘The Doctor. You remember? The learned man I told you about?’

He’s here, in the friary. And he wants to meet you. What do you think of that?’

Roger scowled and hissed. ‘Another deluded fool,’ he whispered. ‘Like you, Thomas. Another one who thinks I have answers, when all I have ever discovered is more questions. Or it’s a trick. I don’t trust anyone. They all want to know my secrets.’ He shook his head and grumbled quietly.

Thomas clenched his fists and struggled to remain calm.

The old man was getting more and more difficult to deal with.

‘Perhaps,’ Thomas admitted. ‘But I think not. The Doctor is a true philosopher of the experiential school, I’m sure of it.

What harm can it do to meet him? Perhaps he will be able to help you in your work. Let’s face it, brother Roger,’ he added, allowing a little of the anger and impatience he felt colour the tone of his voice, ‘you’re not getting on very well on your own.’

Bacon said nothing. In the flickering light of the candle Thomas couldn’t be sure, but he thought the old man was smiling. By the Cross, but he was infuriating.

But anger served no purpose. Not tonight. The appearance of the Doctor offered the best hope for making progress with brother Roger’s project.

‘Rest, brother,’ Thomas said. ‘Sleep, and restore your strength. I’ll attend prayers at midnight and prime, and I’ll say that you’re unwell. Everyone has become accustomed to your absence during night-time prayers. We won’t work tonight.

And there will be none of this.’

Thomas picked up the scourge. The handle was of plain wood; the lashes were of leather with small lozenges of metal plaited into them. The most devout and extreme of hermits, and even some travelling friars, used such implements to scour the flesh and exalt the spirit. Only Thomas knew that brother Roger had one, and that Roger’s back

bore the scars of its lashes. He seemed to need the lacerating encouragement of the whip in order to apply himself to his work.

But not tonight. Followed by Roger's squinting gaze, Thomas went to his own mattress. 'Sleep,' he said. 'Tomorrow we will enlist the Doctor's help.' He blew out the candle.

Chapter Three.

When Nyssa woke up she at first had no idea where she was.

But she felt safe, and warm, and snug. The bed was soft, and she was cocooned in a reassuring weight of blankets and quilts and furs. She was surrounded by darkness, but she could see slits of light. She was in a box and, half asleep, she thought that perhaps she had died, and was lying swathed in velvet cloth in her family's crypt. And it occurred to her that being dead was rather pleasant.

Then she remembered. The castle, lit by torches. Her chamber high in the keep. And the box bed, a wooden cabinet with doors, into which she had climbed before falling into a deep sleep.

She pushed open all the doors, and found that tile room was hardly lighter than tile enclosed bed had been. The windows were framed with lines of golden brightness that seeped in at the edges of the shutters.

She heard a door open, and a rectangle of light appeared with a slender figure silhouetted in it. Nyssa lifted her head, ran her fingers through her curls, and rubbed her eyes. The figure remained in tile doorway. A servant.

'Come in,' Nyssa said.

The servant – a girl – scurried into the room and pulled open the shutters at the two square windows. Sunlight and a fresh breeze flooded into the room. The girl turned, bobbed her head towards Nyssa, and hurried out, only to return immediately with a tray.

'Thank you,' Nyssa said, pulling herself upright against a mound of pillows. 'What's your name?'

'Emma, my lady,' the girl replied.

'That will be all for the moment, Emma,' Nyssa said. It felt like a lifetime had passed since she had last been attended by servants. 'I'll

call you when I'm ready to wash and dress.'

'Yes, my lady,' Emma said, and ran from the room.

The tray contained a beaker of warm, spiced milk and a small loaf of freshly baked bread. Both smelt and tasted delicious.

As Nyssa took her breakfast she could hear, as if from a great distance, the lowing of cattle and the occasional clattering of horses' hooves. The breeze carried the scents of wood-smoke and summer.

She realised that in her bed-in-a-box she had slept without once dreaming. She had a servant named Emma. She had breakfast brought to her on a tray. This was better than Home.

She savoured the last mouthful of spiced milk, threw back the covers and stepped down from the high bed. She found she was wearing only a shift of white linen, and she shivered. The sunlight, when she stepped into it, was warm, and she went to the window to bask in it.

The stone wall was as wide as a cart, and each of the small, square, stone-framed windows was set high in an embrasure which was provided with steps by which to enter it, and two stone seats.

As Nyssa climbed the three deep steps a panorama of the town and the surrounding countryside came into view, and she stopped and stared at it.

She knew she should have expected to see a view: the castle was at the highest point within the town walls, the keep was at the highest point within the castle, and the previous night she had had to climb a seemingly endless spiral of stairs within the keep to reach her bedroom. But she wasn't prepared for the vista that greeted her.

Her room faced east, towards the rising sun. Looking down she could see, immediately below her window, the sheer wall of the keep splaying outwards slightly where it rested on its grassy mound. The inner bailey, surrounded by its curtain wall and towers, was a patchwork of flower-gardens and greenswards, dotted with barns, stables, and other outbuildings from the chimneys of some of which smoke was drifting.

There were people and horses, looking as small as dolls and toys from the height of the keep.

Beyond the castle wall lay the town: a compressed jumble of rooftops,

thatch and tile, and smoking chimneys and tall church towers, squeezed within the irregular oval of its battlemented walls. Nyssa could see, to her right, over the top of the castle gatehouse, rising from the town walls, the tower of the Franciscan friary where she had left the Doctor. She could see, running from the castle to the far end of the town, the long, straight line of the town's axial street. She looked for the tower of the church of St Peter-le-Bailey, which she had passed the previous night on her way to the castle: there it was, halfway between the castle and the crossroads called Carfax, beyond which the line continued as the High Street up and down which she and the Doctor had traipsed all day.

The town appeared to be surrounded by water. Nyssa could see, through the crenellations of its walls, a moat embracing the north of the town. To the south the fields and meadows beyond the walls were divided by sparkling streams and, further away, there was a wide river. The roads leading from the town to the north and south were lined with houses, packed together almost as tightly as those inside the walls.

And all around the town, as far as the eye could see, there lay a patchwork of little fields and copses of trees.

Nyssa knew everything she could see was the result of, and devoted to, commerce, craft, trade, religion and agriculture. She was standing in a man-made fortification, in a man-made town, surrounded by a man-made landscape. And yet it was all simple and small. Oxford was, according to the Doctor, one of the largest conurbations in this nation-state, and yet if she stayed here only a few months she would know all its inhabitants by sight, and many by name. It was a society that she could cope with. And although she knew the streets were crowded, and noisy, and dirty, she was above them –

socially, intellectually and, here in the castle, literally.

If she stayed for a few months. Or longer, perhaps. She rested her elbows on the sill of the window frame and cupped her chin in her hands. It was such a peaceful view.

Footsteps. Marching. Becoming louder, closer, A commotion outside the door. She turned, and Richard was suddenly in the room.

'My lady,' he began, and then stopped, open-mouthed, staring at her.

Nyssa's mood of calm contemplation was shattered. How dare he burst into her room? She glared down at him from the top step of the

window embrasure. With his heavy steps, big boots, long sword, abrupt movements, thoughtless intrusion, he personified everything she wanted to get away from.

‘My lady,’ he stammered, ‘I didn’t think you would not yet be dressed.’

He tore his gaze from her and flung himself round on his heels so that he was facing the door.

‘I beg your pardon, my lady.’ His anguished embarrassment was plain from the strangled tone of his voice.

‘Please forgive me.’

Nyssa couldn’t help smiling. ‘It’s all right, Richard. What do you want?’

Richard’s back was as straight as a lance. His shoulders were tense. ‘I came to tell you, my lady, that my lord’s kinsman, the chancellor of the university, Philip of Sea by, is on his way to the castle, and he would be honoured to meet you.’

Nyssa frowned. Why couldn’t she be left in peace? Even here, in the keep of the castle, it seemed that she was not protected from people who wanted things from her. Still, she would have to meet the chancellor sooner or later. And many others, no doubt. There was no point in putting off the meeting.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘I’ll be down soon. Would you ask Emma to bring my clothes?’

‘Of course, my lady,’ Richard said, and marched from the room.

‘The Doctor?’ Hubert asked. He seemed concerned that Alfric had allowed the stranger out of his sight.

‘Don’t worry, minister,’ Alfric said. ‘He’s in the schoolroom, teaching Latin to the novices. He has a gift for it, apparently. I don’t think our young brethren will let him escape.’

The minister nodded and smiled. ‘Good. In that case we should put to use what little time we have together. Shall we walk out into the fields?’

The two friars said no more until they were outside the town walls. The Franciscans had been endowed with land both inside and outside

the town, and the old king, Henry, had permitted them to demolish part of the town wall and build the friary across it, so that the back walls of the friary buildings now constituted part of the town's defences.

The land between the friary and Trill Mill stream, a wide crescent from the West Gate and Castle Bridge in the west to the little Gate and Preachers' Bridge in the east, was farmed by the grey friars. Here they kept goats, chickens and bees, and tended gardens that produced herbs and vegetables. It was little more than a smallholding, and made a negligible contribution to the friars' pantry, but the Franciscans were an order of preachers and teachers, not farmers. They tilled the fields and bred the animals because it was good to work.

As they walked towards the stream Hubert and Alfric greeted the brothers who were working in the fields and gardens. One was complimented on the growth of his beanstalks; another kept them occupied with a lengthy story about a litter of piglets. Eventually they reached the fish-ponds that lined the bank of the stream, and they were alone.

Hubert stared into a pond, as if he was trying to count the trout and perch. Alfric gazed upstream, to the point where the mill stream issued from the main course of the Thames: there, on a little island, stood the dilapidated house brother Roger had built in his youth, before he joined the order. Once it had been connected by a narrow bridge to the Castle Mill island, but now it was inaccessible except by boat, and no one went there. Already the townspeople told tall stories about the place: it was haunted by spirits that *Doctor Mirabilis* had summoned; it contained a hoard of gold Bacon had transmuted from lead.

'You inspected brother Godwin's remains?' Hubert said.

Alfric turned away from the stream and joined the minister in peering into the pond. 'Yes. And I found the signs that the Doctor predicted.'

'More than one wound on his head?'

'It was difficult to tell.' Alfric winced at the memory of Godwin's bloody pate. 'But I think so.'

'Murder, then. Why, Alfric? Why would anyone have cause to kill Godwin? And it can only have been one of the brothers. It will be difficult to contain the news.'

‘So far,’ Alfric said, ‘only you, I and the Doctor know about this. The chancellor’s young knight seems keen, but perhaps we can keep him off the scent.’

‘At least until we’ve had a chance to investigate the matter ourselves. That’s your prime task, Alfric. Keep the Doctor with you: he might prove useful, and at least you’ll always know where he is and what he’s doing.’

Alfric snorted an ironic laugh. ‘It’s a shame he arrived only yesterday evening,’ he said. ‘Otherwise we could have arranged for him to be suspected of the act.’

‘He’s one of the few people we can be sure didn’t kill brother Godwin,’ Hubert pointed out. ‘Not only was he not here, but if it weren’t for him we wouldn’t even know murder had been done.’ He sighed. ‘Much as I hate to do it, I think we should still try to find a way of implicating brother Roger. It would kill two birds with one stone.’

Alfric stretched his arms above his head. ‘I agree,’ he said.

‘But I think one killing is already more than enough.’

Richard had descended into the castle bailey in order to be alone. He had planned to march round the interior of the curtain wall until he had composed his thoughts. The sight of Nyssa had perturbed him.

But the bailey served only to disturb him further. He wandered aimlessly, and everywhere he looked he found something altered. The castle had been transformed.

He had expected the interior of the keep to have been decorated and furnished in a style fitting for the lady Matilda.

He had not been prepared to find the entire castle changed from a fortress into a garden.

The towers and ramparts still stood, it was true. But every wall had been painted, and in colours more suitable for a lady’s bedchamber than a martial stronghold. The encircling wall was now as blue as the sky, and as bright. Against this background were white clouds and green trees, and among the trees were scenes of courtiers dancing, and maidens playing, and armoured lords rescuing damsels from the clutches of strange beasts. Flags were flying from everyone. of the towers: Richard recognised among them the King’s arms, and those of his own lord’s family, the de Marennes.

All the buildings that lined the tracks that wound down the terraced ground from the mound of the keep to the gatehouse had been decorated in a similar way. In the whole of the bailey the only walls that remained plain were those of the church of St George. Even the mighty walls of the keep itself were now disguised as a spinney of tall trees, with cloven-footed, hairy men dancing among their trunks and winged women flying above their branches across the blue-painted battlements.

Where there had been bare earth, pounded flat by the boots of the garrison soldiers, there were now smooth, straight-sided swards of close-cropped grass. Where there had been middens and heaps of old stones, there were now gardens full of flowers. The colours were so varied and bright it hurt his eyes to look at them. And where there had been rough huts, for use in time of siege for smithying, fletching, and carpentry, there were now bowers entwined with woodbine and roses, and fanciful pavilions, and benches on which one could sit and marvel at the panorama.

Richard sat on one of the benches. He wasn't one for resting his rump, usually, except on the broad back of his destrier: sitting was for ladies and scholars. Now, however, he was grateful for the solid wood beneath him. He tried to clear his mind. He watched as some of the servants brought four chairs from one of the pavilions and arranged them on a circular plane of grass.

He turned his head from one side to the other, surveying the whole of the bailey. He was relieved to see that the tilt-yard had been kept in good repair, even though it was now bounded by roses and its central barrier had been painted in gaudy colours. The archery butts were still in place, and there were platforms on which the garrison could practise with sword and axe and hammer.

He breathed a sigh. The castle could still function as a fortress.

The servants had disappeared. Matilda had still not descended from the keep to receive the chancellor. Richard closed his eyes.

He opened them quickly. As soon as he had had nothing to see, a vision of Nyssa had appeared in the darkness.

He struck his forehead with his gloved hand. How could he have been so stupid, so coarse, so ungentle? He had entered a lady's chamber, unannounced. The chamber of the lady Nyssa. The lady, above all others, whom he wished least to offend. And she had not even been

dressed.

What had she been thinking of, wandering about her room wearing only a shift? But no: he could not blame her. The fault was entirely his.

He put his head in his hands and once again closed his eyes. And once again the vision appeared: the lady Nyssa, framed by the blue sky in her window, turning towards him, her flowing curls gilded by the sunlight, the same sunlight that poured from behind her as she stood above him like a statue of a saint, the sunlight that filtered through the thin material of her shift, making it as transparent as water so that he could see the shapely columns of her legs, he could see –

He sat upright and opened his eyes. He could hear singing.

For a moment he thought he had lost his senses. Then he saw the singer: a young man, dressed in clothes as colourful as a lady's, carrying a stringed instrument, strolling daintily among the flowerbeds, and singing. He waved in Richard's direction.

Richard pretended he hadn't noticed.

He could hear the words of the song, but he couldn't understand them. They sounded like French, but most were unrecognisable and the accent was strange. But it was the song of a lord pining for a lady, that was clear.

A movement drew Richard's attention to the keep. The doors, at the front of a small barbican that projected from the first floor, were opening. A lady emerged on to the wooden bridge that led to the bare stone platform opposite the doors.

This, Richard assumed, was the lady Matilda. Having been told that she was his lord's aunt, and a widow, he had expected her to be a black-clad old crone. Instead she was dressed in a yellow robe and an ornate headdress, and he could see even at a distance that she had a sprightly step.

She was followed by two women and the lady Nyssa.

Richard was relieved that Matilda and Nyssa had already met: having first seen Nyssa only the day before, and Matilda never, he would have found it difficult to introduce them to each other.

The two ladies stood on the platform. Matilda summoned Nyssa to her

side and, pointing with her hand, showed her the features of the bailey-turned-garden.

Richard heard footsteps, and turned to see the wide figure of the chancellor, supported by a servant, walking slowly up from the gatehouse. Richard presumed he had been waiting there until Matilda appeared. The chancellor raised a hand.

Matilda answered with a wave, and led Nyssa down the steep steps from the platform to the bailey.

‘Come here, Richard,’ the chancellor called. From opposite directions he, and Matilda and Nyssa, were making for the chairs that had been set out on the grass.

Reluctantly Richard rose from the bench. Under his breath he practised a few phrases in the courtly language. He didn’t know how he would be able to face the lady Nyssa. Had she told Matilda about his rough behaviour that morning? Or, even worse, might she complain about him to both Matilda and the chancellor?

Richard was the last to reach the circle of chairs. The others were already seated by the time he approached. He was relieved to see that everyone was smiling. It seemed that Matilda had just introduced Nyssa to the chancellor.

‘I. confess, young lady,’ the chancellor confided to Nyssa in a booming voice that could be heard anywhere in the bailey,

‘that yesterday I instructed this fellow to eject you from the town.’ He waved a plump arm towards Richard. ‘And instead I find he’s invited you to the castle. But I’m delighted,’ he added, leaning towards her and lowering his voice a little, ‘that he had the sense to do so.’

Nyssa smiled weakly. She was holding her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun, and Richard couldn’t see most of her face. ‘So am I, chancellor,’ she said. ‘Your kinsman’s knight has been most courteous and helpful.’

Richard could hardly believe his ears. He muttered a soldier’s oath. The lady had no complaint with him.

‘Sit yourself down, Richard,’ the chancellor said in English: ‘Pin back your ears and you’ll learn something about this town and the goings-on in it.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Richard said, but no sooner had he sat in the chair than he was struggling to his feet again as the chancellor introduced him to the lady Matilda.

‘And how does my nephew fare in the wars?’ Matilda asked Richard, after he had bowed to her and greeted her appropriately. ‘You’ve just arrived from the misty mountains of Wales, I believe.’

Richard smiled gratefully. Soldiering was a subject he could talk about. ‘The fighting’s over, my lady, except for the occasional skirmish. That’s why my lord could spare me to attend the chancellor here. The King is waiting for the Welsh nobles to sue for peace. Your nephew was unhurt when I left.

He took a knife blade in his left shoulder about five weeks ago, but the wound has healed.’

‘I am pleased,’ Matilda said, in a decisive tone that deterred Richard from proceeding further with descriptions of battles and sieges. But the lady smiled at him, and he knew she was satisfied with his account.

‘If I may say so, my lady,’ Richard ventured, ‘you look no older than your valiant nephew.’ He knew that ladies liked to be complimented on their appearance. However, once spoken his words sounded almost rude.

The lady Matilda seemed to take no offence. ‘How kind of you, Richard,’ she said. ‘I admit to being just a little older than Guy, in truth. I do hope you don’t think we’re very alike,’ she added, with pretended alarm. ‘I am much more merry than he.’

‘I don’t doubt it, my lady,’ Richard said. He didn’t know what else to say. Guy de Marenne was stern, taciturn, and unflinching in battle. After a few flagons of wine, however, he was as merry as any other lord, and he had a particular reputation for whoring. Richard thought it best not to try to present Guy’s aunt with these contradictions.

Matilda resembled her nephew hardly at all, except in being short of stature: she was hardly taller than the lady Nyssa, the top of whose pretty head barely reached Richard’s shoulder. She was buxom, but not yet plump, and her face and limbs were constantly animated as she talked. At any other time Richard would have thought her comely, were it possible that he would have allowed himself such thoughts about his lord’s aunt. With Nyssa sitting beside her, however, Matilda’s charms were eclipsed.

The chancellor leant towards Richard. 'I've told the sheriff you're the new constable of the castle,' he said. 'He wasn't happy about it. But when I said you'd come direct from the King, he knew there was no point in arguing. Since Matilda's been in residence he's had precious little to do with the place, anyway.'

'Thank you, my lord,' Richard said. He was glad to know that his position at the castle was official. On the other hand, to be appointed constable without the approval of the sheriff would annoy the burgesses of the town. Richard swore quietly again. He hated politicking. As he looked up his eyes met Nyssa's. She was looking at him with a sympathetic smile.

She averted her eyes.

Was it possible that she didn't hate him?

'What do you make of my transformation of the castle, young knight?' Matilda asked him. 'Is it not wondrous?'

Richard cast his eyes once again across the gardens and painted walls. 'Very wondrous,' he said, temporising. 'It is quite remarkably, er; wondrous.'

Matilda clapped her hands together and laughed. 'He doesn't like it,' she whispered loudly to Nyssa. 'He thinks it's insufficiently military.'

'I like it, my lady,' Nyssa said simply. 'It's cheerful and peaceful.'

'I have banished Mars,' Matilda declared, 'and have replaced him with Venus. Do you not see?' she asked, looking from Richard to Nyssa. 'When the King next holds his court here he will find his fortress transformed into a garden of love.'

His lords and ladies will walk among the flowers, and listen to the songs of troubadours, and dance. The prize in the tilt-yard will be a glance from a lady. Here, the only donjons to be stormed are the strongholds of ladies' hearts.'

Richard and Nyssa murmured their approval, but Richard thought Nyssa seemed as unenthusiastic as he was. He wondered what Edward Plantagenet would make of Oxford Castle. The King was devoted to his queen and to warfare, and had little time for anything else. Richard suspected that Matilda would receive few thanks for the transformation she had made, and that the entire de Marenne household might suffer for it.

But he knew that these days in order to win a lady's heart it was necessary to pen verses and sing songs, or at least to pay others to pen and sing them. Then there was the whole finicky business of wearing the lady's favour, and sending her little gifts the nature of which a man couldn't be expected to understand. And dancing! Richard had never mastered it.

He looked at Nyssa again. It was hopeless. Here, in Matilda's garden of love, his inadequacies as a suitor would be cruelly exposed. How could he even imagine that he might win her?

'And how are you, Philip?' Matilda asked the chancellor, interrupting Richard's maudlin thoughts. 'How is the fulcrum of the Oxford see-saw?'

The chancellor humphed. 'Busy, as ever,' he said. 'As you know, I've appointed sound reeves to manage my estates.

That's the secret. I can concentrate all my attention on this place. And that keeps me occupied from dawn to dusk every day, I assure you.'

'Who is causing difficulties at the moment?' Matilda asked playfully. 'The scholars? The churchmen? The bishop?'

The friars? The Jews? The mayor? The merchants?'

The chancellor scowled. 'It's no laughing matter,' he said.

'The mayor and burgesses have been trying to put up rents again for the scholars and teachers. It's lucky so many of the houses used by the schools are owned by the churches. And the poorer sort of townspeople have been fighting with some of the scholars again. That's one of the things I want you to see to, Richard.' The chancellor shifted his bulk so that he was facing the knight. 'Take half the garrison into the town this afternoon. Show of strength, you know. Make sure you patrol in the Jewish quarter: there's been trouble there too. Knock a few heads if you have to, but mind whose heads you knock. If it's a student, make sure it's not the son of a lord. If it's a tradesman, go for the meaner ones: I don't want to find out you've clobbered one of the town council. And if it's a Jew, do it discreetly: I don't want you to encourage attacks on the Hebrews, there's enough of that already. Understood?'

'Yes, my lord,' Richard said, but – had it not been for the proximity of Nyssa – he was beginning to wish he was back among the damp crags of Wales, where anyone who was not in your army was your enemy.

He was to separate the argumentative factions of Oxford, but without hurting the ringleaders. It wasn't a decent job for a knight.

He looked from the chancellor to Matilda. These were his lord's kinsmen, and it was his duty to serve them. He straightened his shoulders. He resolved to do his best. Perhaps, if he performed his duties well, the lady Nyssa would be a little impressed.

'And what about the friars?' Matilda asked. 'Are the Dominicans and the Franciscans still at each other's throats?'

'It's not too bad,' the chancellor replied. 'The grey friars are controlling the more inflammatory of their brothers, and so the black friars can't pin charges of heresy on them. I would have said the Franciscans had the upper hand – until yesterday.'

Richard and Nyssa exchanged a glance. They both knew of the death in the friary. Nyssa stood abruptly, and said the heat was making her feel faint. She refused all offers of assistance, and walked slowly away towards a shady bower.

Matilda knew nothing of the previous evening's discovery, and asked her cousin to explain.

'One of the friars is dead,' the chancellor said bluntly.

'And the minister won't let me in. Richard was there last night. Stopped at the gate by a gang of friars. That's suspicious enough, but the dead friar is Godwin – one of the two Franciscan brothers who bring me little pieces of information from time to time. I'll get no more tittle-tattle from Godwin. I just hope that isn't why he's dead.'

Matilda's eyes were wide and glittering with excitement.

'And,' the chancellor went on, 'I hope the one wasn't killed by the other. Oswald. Those two were always bickering, particularly after they'd been at the wine. The problem we've got, Richard, is that Oswald's news from inside the friary will be more important than ever. But Hubert will be watching all his friars like a hawk. If Oswald comes to my house, or reports to you here at the castle, Hubert will know of it. And I'll lose my one remaining source of unofficial information about the Franciscans.'

'Oh, that's easily dealt with,' Matilda declared. 'I can help. This cloak and dagger stuff is so exciting. I'll write to Hubert and ask him to send Oswald to me as, I don't know, a confessor, or something. Or to teach

me, that would be better.

Is he learned in any skill?’

‘He propagates vegetables,’ the chancellor said. ‘He’s not exactly the most scholarly of Hubert’s flock.’

‘But that’s perfect,’ Matilda cried. ‘Everyone knows about my garden. Brother Oswald is just the adviser I need. I’ll send a letter at once.’

‘That’s the door,’ Alfric said, pointing. ‘Brother Roger shares a room with his pupil, Thomas. They don’t encourage visitors.

As you can see, they keep the door shut.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ the Doctor said. ‘They’ll be pleased to see me.’

Alfric stood back to allow the Doctor to pass him in the narrow passage. The Doctor strode to the door and knocked on it. To Alfric’s surprise it swung open immediately. Brother Thomas was standing in the doorway.

‘You must be the Doctor,’ Thomas said, with an effusiveness that seemed to Alfric to be entirely out of character. ‘We’re so pleased to see you.’

The Doctor looked over his shoulder. ‘What did I tell you?’ he said to Alfric. He turned back towards Thomas. ‘I’m delighted to be here. Is brother Roger receiving visitors today?’

‘He’s anxious to meet you, Doctor,’ Thomas said, and stood aside.

Alfric hadn’t failed to notice the stress Thomas had placed on the word ‘you’, or the quick glance Thomas had given him, as if he had thought of closing the door before Alfric could follow the Doctor into the room. In two wide strides Alfric was on the Doctor’s heels, and Thomas was obliged to allow him in.

It had been some weeks since Alfric had last seen Roger Bacon, and although he knew the schoolman was old and frail he was almost as taken aback as the Doctor at his appearance.

Roger was lying on his bed. His limbs were as thin as sticks, and his face was like a grey skull.

‘Brother Roger,’ the Doctor exclaimed, kneeling beside the bed, ‘are

you ill?’

Roger’s thin lips twitched. ‘Only if old age is a disease,’

he said. His voice was surprisingly strong. He sat up without difficulty. ‘I am told you are a man of learning,’ he said, ‘and that you have travelled a great distance to visit me.’

‘Guilty on both counts,’ the Doctor said.

‘Very wise of you.’ Bacon swung his glance from the Doctor to Alfric. ‘I still possess all of my mental faculties, and I know more about natural philosophy than anyone in this dismal friary. Or anyone in this town, for that matter.’ He glared belligerently.

‘But you’re not working on new studies now?’ the Doctor asked. Alfric saw him scanning the room, and looking puzzled because all the paraphernalia and papers were covered in dust and obviously had been untouched for months if not years.

In fact Alfric knew that brother Roger’s belongings had been looked at recently: he had gone through them himself, more than once in the last year, on the few occasions when neither Roger nor Thomas was in the room. He had been searching for evidence that Roger was carrying out and writing up new experiments. Such activities were not proper for a Franciscan friar, and brother Roger in particular had been banned by the minister from indulging in his youthful practices. Hubert’s view was that it would be preferable for the Franciscans to discipline Roger themselves, rather than wait until the Dominicans accused him of heresy.

Unfortunately, although Alfric had discovered many strange things and texts in Roger’s cell, he had found nothing to prove that the old scholar was in breach of Hubert’s instructions.

‘New studies?’ Roger asked, as if the concept was repugnant. He shook his head violently. ‘I’ve given up all of that, Doctor. Oh, yes. I no longer pursue philosophical chimeras. I follow the rules of my order. Prayer. Meditation.

Good works. You should try it, Doctor,’ he added, and cackled with laughter.

Brother Thomas stepped forward and placed a hand on the Doctor’s shoulder. The Doctor spun round, and Thomas hurriedly withdrew his hand. ‘My master tires easily,’ he muttered. ‘Please don’t excite him.’

Brother Roger leant back against the wall at the head of the bed and appeared to close his eyes. Alfric thought he could still see the old man's eyes darting back and forth, following the Doctor's movements as he stood and stepped back to stand alongside Alfric.

'My only work,' Roger said suddenly, 'as my age and health allow, is to lecture occasionally in the university. My only writing is of infrequent letters to fellow scholars.'

'Respectively,' Alfric whispered to the Doctor, 'rabble-rousing heresy and vituperative criticism.'

Thomas glared at him.

The Doctor smiled easily, as if he had no inkling that the atmosphere in the room was thick with tension, and went to a table piled with books, papers, quills and oddly shaped contraptions.

'A chart of the night sky,' he said, perusing a dusty, dog-eared parchment. 'Remarkably accurate, too.' He picked up a short metal tube that appeared to have its ends stoppered with glass, and held it up to his right eye. 'Ingenious,' he commented. 'Aha!' he exclaimed, and grasped in his other hand a jagged lump, as big as a man's head, of glittering rock.

'And what is this?' He lifted it as if it weighed no more than an empty bladder.

He brought his hands closer together, and Alfric almost uttered an oath he thought he had long forgotten when he saw the metal tube fly from the Doctor's hand and stick to the rock.

'A lodestone,' the Doctor said. He weighed the rock in his palm. 'A metallic ore with many wonderful properties. Very useful properties,' he added thoughtfully.

'I can see you are knowledgeable, Doctor,' brother Roger said. 'As it happens I am strong enough to lecture today. The Italian scholars have asked me to speak this afternoon, in the schoolroom on Catte Street. You might like to attend.'

'Very much, brother Roger,' the Doctor said. His enthusiasm seemed to Alfric to be unfeigned. 'It will be a memorable occasion.'

Roger nodded. 'Yes. You might learn something. Until this afternoon, then.' He closed his eyes.

Thomas held open the door.

‘That, I think, is our signal to leave,’ Alfric said. He and the Doctor ducked through the doorway, and heard Thomas shut the door firmly behind them.

‘Well, Doctor,’ Alfric said after they had walked together in silence to the larger of the two cloisters, ‘what do you make of him?’

The Doctor looked thoughtful. ‘I’m surprised that he’s given up working and writing,’ he said at last. ‘He was vehement about it.’

Brother Roger’s denials had come as no surprise to Alfric, given Hubert’s proscription of Roger’s activities. But why, Alfric wondered, had the Doctor expected to find that Roger was still engaged in his unholy experiments? Had Roger written to the Doctor about his work? Perhaps, at last, Alfric could find the evidence against Roger that Hubert wanted.

‘You expected to find him deep in his researches,’ Alfric said, trying to keep the excitement from his voice. ‘What gave you such expectations?’

‘Oh, you know,’ the Doctor said, and Alfric knew at once from his tone that his reply would be anodyne, ‘brother Roger has such a reputation among scholars. It’s hard to believe he could turn his back on his research into natural philosophy and devote himself instead to prayers.’

‘I can only agree,’ Alfric said. He and the Doctor had completed a circuit of the cloister, and both were so deep in thought that they started on a second. The sun was approaching its zenith, and the shade under the arcades was welcomingly cool. Alfric was sure the Doctor had more information about brother Roger than he was willing to reveal.

But then, why should he expect the Doctor to be open with him, when he was concealing things from the Doctor?

He glanced sideways at the Doctor. There could be no doubting the man’s learning and acuity. Alfric had not started his schooling until, as an adult, he had joined the Franciscan order: as a result he had a regard for the value of education that he knew was perhaps exaggerated. Nonetheless he decided that he would trust the Doctor – at least a little.

‘You must know, Doctor,’ Alfric said, ‘that it is brother Roger’s duty as a friar to pray and preach, having put aside all worldly possessions and concerns. In addition brother Hubert, who is minister here and responsible for the most important of the seven Franciscan custodies of England, placed a specific ban on Roger pursuing his researches. It is well known that Roger Bacon spent his entire birthright on his experiments, and he was not by any means poor. Hubert was concerned to ensure that Roger would not expend the friary’s resources in the same way. And in recent years it has become more and more important for we grey friars to be above reproach. We have a reputation to maintain – for poverty and honesty, among other things. Other orders would not be unhappy to discover that we were harbouring a wastrel or a heretic – and brother Roger could be seen as both.’

‘I see,’ the Doctor said. ‘This is more complicated than I expected.’ He stared up at the stone arches. ‘Perhaps I’ve arrived too late,’ he said to himself. He turned to Alfric. ‘So you’re keen to find anything that proves that Roger Bacon is still working and writing,’ he said, ‘so that you can stop him, and discipline him openly. The world will see that the Franciscans can deal with their own problems.’

‘Precisely, Doctor.’

‘Well, I don’t like it,’ the Doctor said. ‘But I, too, would like to be reassured that brother Roger hasn’t stopped his researches. A friend of mine has a thesis that depends on it. So we can work together, at least until we find what we’re looking for.’ He grinned, and then his face fell. ‘Of course, there’s the death of brother Godwin to consider. I suppose brother Hubert has already realised that it can be seen as an opportunity as much as a threat.’

‘I’m afraid so, Doctor.’ Alfric drew a deep breath. ‘If we can find evidence to implicate brother Roger in Godwin’s death then we will have the means to control brother Roger, and we will prevent any scandal.’

‘What would happen to brother Roger,’ the Doctor asked cautiously, ‘if you were to find such evidence?’

‘We would keep him here,’ Alfric said. ‘But he would be kept locked in a cell for most of the time, and he would be prevented from writing. It would ensure that he could cause no embarrassment to the order.’

Alfric had expected the Doctor to be outraged, but instead he

appeared to be considering the idea of brother Roger's imprisonment. 'That would be preferable to some of the alternatives,' he concluded. 'Even though it's a dastardly thing to do.'

Alfric recoiled from the intensity of the Doctor's glare.

'Be assured,' he said, 'that I won't manufacture a case against brother Roger. I fear, in any case, that the perpetrator of the murder may be another of the brothers. Oswald and Godwin were constantly drinking and arguing together. Sometimes they fought.'

'So what is your next move?' the Doctor asked.

'There's still a little time before the prayers at sext,' Alfric said. 'I thought I'd take a look at the garden – just under the friary wall, where the stairs from the wine cellar emerge.'

'Do you know,' the Doctor said, 'I was thinking exactly the same. But I'll join you there in a moment, if I may.'

Someone's been lurking in the corridor behind us all the time we've been walking round and round this delightful cloister –

so like my own – and he obviously wants to talk to one of us alone. So let's separate, and meet outside the walls later.'

Alfric nodded, and paced slowly away from the Doctor.

Whatever the Doctor was, and wherever he came from, he was proving useful.

At last the Doctor was alone. Thomas had been beginning to think that the proctor had been attached to the Doctor's arm, so inseparable had the two men become.

But now brother Alfric was leaving the cloister, and the Doctor was alone.

Thomas didn't think he had made a noise, but the Doctor turned as he approached. Thomas felt his confidence shrink.

Unlike most of the friars, the Doctor was his equal in every way: in size, in rude health and vigour, and in strength of mind. And there was something different about the Doctor, something that felt almost familiar.

'What a fortunate meeting, Doctor,' Thomas said. 'I hoped to see you

again.'

'And here I am,' the Doctor said. 'What can I do for you?'

'It concerns my master, brother Roger,' Thomas said. He drew close to the Doctor, and looked to right and left to make sure there was no one who could overhear their conversation.

The charade was only partly for his companion's benefit: Thomas didn't want anyone but the Doctor to hear what he had to say. 'I have come on my master's behalf to ask for your help. As a fellow doctor of natural philosophy.'

'Really?' The Doctor looked intrigued. 'I'm flattered. Tell me more.'

'Perhaps you don't know this, Doctor,' Thomas began, although he knew that the Doctor knew, because he had overheard brother Alfric tell him, 'but brother Roger is forbidden to pursue his life's work exploring the mysteries of the natural world. That is why he has to deny that he is doing any such thing.'

'Yes,' the Doctor said. 'I thought it was something like that. But he is still working, isn't he?' His eyes gleamed with excitement.

'Yes,' Thomas admitted. 'He works in secret, and he works too hard. His quest for knowledge is sapping his health and strength. I do what I can to sustain him, but he is growing weaker. Will you help him?'

The Doctor did not hide his enthusiasm well. 'What is he working on at the moment?'

Thomas knew better than to reveal everything at once. If the Doctor was to be persuaded to help, he would have to be played like a fish on a line. 'It's a new formula. A combination of forces that will produce untold benefits for everyone.' That, Thomas thought, was sufficiently vague. 'Will you assist us?'

'Well, I'll do what I can. Of course, this will have to be kept secret from everyone in the friary.'

'Of course. I'll tell brother Roger the good news, I'll learn from him the specific questions for which he requires answers, and I'll contact you again. I know where your cell is.' Thomas hoped his last words hadn't sounded like a threat. Now, to cement their new alliance, he would give the Doctor the information he needed to finish his inquiries into Godwin's death. 'As for the murder,' he said, 'you should

know that brother Godwin had been going to the wine cellar more and more frequently. He was becoming an embarrassment to the brotherhood. I wouldn't be surprised if brother Alfric himself, acting for the minister, killed Godwin.'

'Now that is interesting,' the Doctor said. 'I shall certainly look into it.'

Thomas bowed, turned, and hurried away. He didn't like to leave brother Roger alone. He was disappointed in the Doctor's response to the news that Alfric could be the murderer. On the other hand, it was gratifying that the Doctor was clearly interested in brother Roger's work. That was the important thing. The work had to be finished.

Alfric shifted from one haunch to the other. It was damnably uncomfortable to be crouching behind the plinth of the stone cross, and he began to wonder whether it was worth waiting.

At least the plinth shaded most of his body from the direct beams of the sun. A friar's habit was not the coolest of clothing. And at least no one had walked along the path and asked him what he was doing.

At last. The Doctor emerged, blinking in the sudden light, from the little door in the high wall. He was only a few paces from where Alfric was hiding, but he thought he was alone.

He looked to the east and then the west, and Alfric knew he could see only the walls of the friary buildings merging into the town's defences. The Doctor put his hand to his forehead and peered out across the friary gardens.

When he once again turned away, Alfric rose from behind the plinth. He hefted the staff in his hand. He had only to take two silent steps. It would be a simple matter to strike the Doctor dead.

The Doctor turned suddenly. 'There you are,' he exclaimed with a broad grin. He peered beyond Alfric's shoulder. 'I suppose you were hiding behind the base of this cruciform structure.'

Alfric lowered the staff. 'I thought it would be a good place for a murder,' he said.

'Not a wise choice by day,' the Doctor said, pointing to the friars working in the vegetable beds. 'But very quiet at night, I should think. And convenient, too, if you wanted to hide the body in the wine cellar.'

‘Brother Godwin was short, but not slight. Our murderer would need to be strong to drag him into the corridor and down the steps.’

‘The question is,’ the Doctor said, ‘why? Why here? If Godwin was killed because he saw or heard something, then this is an unlikely place. All you can see is the wall, stretching away on both sides, and in front of you are the gardens.’

Beyond that there appears to be a stream, but you can hardly see it from here. Perhaps Godwin saw someone entering the friary through this door? Or heard a conversation in the corridor?’

‘Possibly,’ Alfric said. ‘We have no way of knowing. But there is one interesting thing you can see from here.’

Hitching up the skirt of his habit and breathing a quick prayer asking for forgiveness, Alfric grasped the upright of the stone cross and pulled himself on to the plinth. With surprising agility the Doctor jumped up beside him. Alfric pointed west, to where Trill Mill stream diverged from the wide channel of the Thames.

‘Do you see, Doctor,’ he said. ‘West of the castle the river runs around several small islands. There, opposite the tower of St George’s within the castle, is the castle mill, straddling the mill stream. Beyond it is Quaking Bridge, which leads to the castle’s rear entrance on one side, and on to the largest of the islands on the other. Now look towards the nearest tip of that island. Can you see the very small islet? It used to be connected to the island by a bridge.’

‘And I can see that there’s a building on the little island,’

the Doctor said. ‘It looks rather run-down. And inaccessible.’

‘It used to belong to brother Roger,’ Alfric said. ‘Many years ago, before he joined the order. He called it his observatory, because, it is said, he used to go there at night to look at the heavens. As you saw in his cell, he made accurate charts of the positions of the stars, and so I believe the stories are true. As his fortune diminished he retreated there, emerging from his studies only to lecture in town. But the building has been locked up for years. No one goes there.’

‘But if someone had been there,’ the Doctor said, ‘two nights ago, for instance, and had been showing a light, then brother Godwin might have seen something. And so he might have been killed here.’

‘I’m sure of that, at least,’ Alfric said. He climbed down from the

plinth. 'I found this staff hidden among the pea plants. Just there.' He pointed to the nearest bed of vegetables.

'Not well hidden, either, so perhaps it was dark, and perhaps whoever hid it was in a hurry.'

'And perhaps nervous, too. Of course,' the Doctor added after a pause for thought, 'the fact that you found the staff here proves nothing. If I were a murderer, I might hide my weapon somewhere as distant as possible from the scene of the crime. I might even place it somewhere where it could be found easily, in order to confuse anyone who found it. Can I see the staff?'

He took it from Alfric's hand. 'I suppose you noticed these stains on the head?' he asked. He sniffed the discoloured wood. 'Blood, I should think.'

Alfric was impressed with the Doctor's ability to notice details, but he didn't allow his admiration to divert him from his objectives. 'Who was following us in the cloisters?' he asked nonchalantly.

'It was brother Thomas,' the Doctor replied. 'As you well know, because I saw you turn back and look.'

'And did he have anything of interest to say?' Alfric was not going to be deterred.

'He advised me that brother Godwin was becoming an embarrassment to the friary. But I'm sure you knew that. I imagine you've had cause to discipline him yourself. It's odd you didn't mention it to me, however.'

Alfric said nothing, but he cursed himself silently. There was no point in keeping things from the Doctor: the man was wily enough to find out everything, and if he wanted his trust he would have to hold nothing back.

'He also said that you were the murderer,' the Doctor said grimly. Alfric took a step back. The Doctor looked as though he knew how to use the staff, and if he thought Alfric was a killer he might do so.

'And the interesting thing about that,' the Doctor went on,

'is that neither of us mentioned that Godwin had been murdered. So how did Thomas know?'

‘He couldn’t have known,’ Alfric said. ‘But he might have guessed. As evidence of him being implicated, it’s no stronger than the fact that you found me in possession of a bloodstained staff.’

‘Which you say you discovered under the peas,’ the Doctor said ‘but which you could have been keeping in your cell since you used it to bump off brother Godwin.’

‘But I didn’t, Doctor,’ Alfric said quietly.

‘No, I don’t believe you did,’ the Doctor said with a smile.

‘But it just shows how far we are from understanding what did happen here two nights ago.’

From the little window of his cell, high in the south wall of the friary, overlooking the gardens, Oswald watched brother Alfric and the stranger called the Doctor walk along the base of the wall and out of sight. He put his hand on his chest: his heart was pounding like a fulling-mill. He had heard every word the two men had said.

Chapter Four

There were advantages, Richard realised, in having the lady Matilda residing at the castle. Although she had done nothing to maintain military discipline among the garrison troops, she had at least kept them in clean and patched surcoats, newly embroidered with the de Marenne arms. They looked presentable.

He strode up and down the ragged line of men. He had selected to accompany him into the town the half-dozen who seemed least drunk, and he had spent an hour reminding them

– with the flat of his sword when necessary – how to obey a knight’s instructions, and how to use their halberds and knives. They were unshaven and none too clean under their immaculate surcoats, but looked no worse than the men from Hockley whom Richard had left in Wales. And, Richard thought, it would do no harm if they appeared a bit rough: his objective, after all, was to impress the townspeople with a show of strength.

‘Remember,’ he yelled at them, ‘you do what I tell you, when I tell you. And nothing else. If I see one of you stepping out of line, the whole bunch of you will spend the night in the lock-up. Don’t lay a finger on anyone unless I say so. Is that clear?’

The men mumbled and scraped their boots on the grass.

‘I said is that clear?’ Richard shouted.

‘Yes, sire,’ they chorused.

‘Very good,’ Richard said. ‘If you do well this afternoon you’ll have wine instead of beer this evening. Now have a break while I take my leave of the lady Matilda.’

Richard watched the men as they shouldered their halberds and made for the shade of the barrack-room. They looked considerably more like soldiers now than they had when he first summoned them to the tilt-yard, and he felt a familiar glow of pride.

He envied them their leather shirts and leggings. He had dispensed with his helm, shield and chausses, but had decided that in order to impress the town he should wear his mail hauberk and carry his sword: both were heavy, and in the rays of the midday sun he was sweating under the hauberk. His surcoat, smeared with Welsh mud and blood, was a disgrace to the arms it bore, particularly in comparison with those worn by the castle troops; on the other hand, he thought, his battle-stained coat might make the people of Oxford at least a little wary of him.

He marched across the bailey, up the sloping path to the keep. It wasn’t necessary to say farewell to Matilda: she knew that he was leading a squad into the town, and that he would be back before sunset. But he thought it would be courteous, and it was clear that Matilda appreciated courtesy. And there was always a chance that he would see the lady Nyssa again.

The sun beat down on him as he climbed the steps to the door of the keep. As a lad he had harboured ambitions to go on crusade to the Holy Land; now he wondered how he would cope with the heat. It was said that it was hotter there, all the year and even at night, than the hottest summer’s day in England. And the Saracens, for all their perfidy and heathenish beliefs, were reckoned to be doughty warriors.

With his mind full of battles and sieges, Richard plunged into the cool darkness of the donjon and, invigorated, ran up the spiral stairs.

He remembered to stop on the threshold of the lady Matilda’s chamber. He stamped his feet to announce his presence, and waited until she called to him to enter.

He pushed open the door and found himself in a dream.

Although even after an evening of feasting, and drinking Gascon wine, he had never dreamt of such colours. The room appeared to be made of rich fabrics. Not an inch of the floorboards was not covered in rugs; not an inch of the stone walls was not concealed behind tapestries; even the ceiling was draped with cloth, so that it seemed he was in a vast tent.

Only the view through the windows, of the bailey and St George's church, told him that he was still in Oxford Castle.

The bed was piled high with pillows and quilts. There was a table, and chairs, and wooden chests, but all were covered in cloths and littered with cushions. Every hard edge, every flat surface, had been softened and padded. In his metal hauberk and stiff boots, with his sword hanging at his side, he felt like an intruder.

'Come in, Richard, come in,' Matilda called to him. She was sitting – alone, he noted – in the embrasure of one of the windows.

Richard advanced hesitantly into the room. The lady Matilda appeared to be only a little more dressed than Nyssa had been when he had burst into her room that morning, and he had no desire to repeat his mistake. He looked down at his stained surcoat. His appearance could hardly fail to offend the sensibilities of a lady. 'I'm sorry, my lady,' he said. 'It's not fitting that I should be here. I came only to inform you that I am about to take a squad of troops into the town.' He bowed, and turned to leave.

'Oh, stay a while, Richard,' Matilda said, with laughter in her voice. 'Let me look at you in your shining armour.'

He turned again, and averted his eyes as Matilda stepped down from the window. She was wearing a blue robe over her shift, but it was tied loosely. The vision of Nyssa, lit by sunlight, swam once again into his mind. 'I'm wearing only my hauberk,' he said, 'and that is warm enough, my lady, in this heat. In battle I would also wear my helm, my coif and chausses of mail, and metal plates to guard my shoulders, elbows and knees. And I would carry my shield, and on it your nephew's badge.'

'I'm sure you look magnificently martial,' Matilda said.

She was standing only an arm's length in front of him. 'But this must be more comfortable. And less noisy, too. All that clanking metal! And

knights look so sinister in their helmets. I like to be able to see the faces of my visitors – even one who looks as though he’s just come from slaughter on the battlefield.’

She was teasing him, but he felt mortified. What had he been thinking of, to enter her chamber with his sword at his side and his clothes tainted with old blood? ‘I’m sorry, my lady,’ he said. ‘It is easy for me to think of this place as a castle, but I forget that it is also your house.’ He looked at the colourful softness all around him and hoped his voice didn’t betray his disapproval. ‘This room is no place for a soldier.’

‘Oh, I don’t entirely agree, Richard.’ She was speaking, he realised with a shock, in the tone the camp-followers used when they wanted food or money. Unlike them, though, she didn’t come close enough for him to touch her. He wouldn’t have known what to do if she had. ‘There are times when a lady pines for a young, tall, strong knight, hot from battle, chafing in his armour, to appear in her bedchamber.’ She saw the expression on his face and laughed gaily. ‘Don’t worry, Richard. You’re safe with me.’ She tightened the laces of her robe and danced away from him. ‘This is only one of my houses, you know,’ she said. ‘My husband left me estates near Buckingham and Banbury.’

‘I beg your pardon, my lady,’ Richard said. He hoped Matilda would dismiss him soon: there was no sign of Nyssa, and he was anxious to begin his patrol.

Matilda picked up the papers she had been reading when he entered the chamber. ‘A wealthy widow receives many suits,’ she said with a sigh. ‘Particularly if she is still young.’

What do you suppose these are, sir knight?’

‘I have no idea, my lady.’

‘Love letters, Richard. Three of them. Each from a lord who pledges me undying devotion.’ She fanned her face with the papers. ‘And all in the vilest language. This one thinks to interest me by listing, down to the last pigsty and pullet, his forests, fields and flocks. This one, who I know to be lame and twisted, provides a description of himself which would be an exaggeration were he Apollo. And as for this one: well, I would read you a sentence or two, but I fear it would make you blush. Do you read, Richard?’

Richard hung his head. ‘Not well, my lady.’

Matilda tutted. ‘That’s the trouble, you see. How can these lords

expect to win my hand when they have no skill with words? I'm sure not one of these three would know which end of a quill to dip in the ink. A lady needs to be wooed, you see.

Her heart has to be besieged with warm words and gallant deeds.'

'Is that the secret, my lady?' Richard blurted. 'If I – if a knight wishes to win a lady, must he write courtly letters?'

Matilda looked at him shrewdly. 'Take one step at a time,'

she advised him. 'Start by becoming interested in something other than horses and warfare. Although, if you were to compose a lover's lyric, I suspect that your messenger would have only a short journey to deliver it.' She inclined her head to her left, towards the chamber of the lady Nyssa.

Richard felt his cheeks reddening. 'Thank you for your guidance,' he said, 'but now I must be leaving. The men are waiting. Good afternoon, my lady.'

As he left the room he heard her laughing.

Thomas shook the reins and shouted at the donkey, which flicked its ears and moved forward a few more sluggish steps.

Thomas looked over his shoulder and saw that brother Roger was still sitting in the back of the cart with his thin legs splayed, basking in the afternoon sun and not in the least concerned that he was late for his own lecture.

Thomas had decided to use the donkey cart because he hadn't been sure that Roger would be strong enough to walk through the crowded streets to the other end of town. But he had forgotten that it was a market day and, although most of the out-of-town hawkers had packed up and left, the streets were still almost impassable. And the donkey was as obstinate as brother Roger himself.

They were now within sight of the house rented by the Italian scholars, and the fact that the donkey could still make hardly any headway against the press of people made Thomas more impatient than ever. The imprecations he yelled at the head of the oblivious animal would have sounded coarse from the mouth of a blacksmith, and people turned and stared when they realised that they were being uttered by a grey friar.

Meanwhile the scholars waiting under the eaves of the Italian house had realised that Doctor Bacon, as they called him, was in the little cart, and some pushed their way through the crowds to greet him, and jump up alongside him, and shout that *Doctor Mirabilis* was coming, and generally create so much noise that Thomas's curses were drowned.

The Italian school was the most polyglot in Oxford. Only a few of the scholars were from Italy: churchmen, monks and friars, mainly, from Rome and Padua. The rest – the sons of merchants and noblemen, as well as more Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites – had come to Oxford from all over Christendom and had attached themselves loosely to the Italian house. The clamour around the donkey cart was mainly in Latin, but Thomas heard occasional shouts in English, French, Provencal and German, as well as Italian and other languages he could not identify.

When the scholars, in their impatience to hear brother Roger teach, began to pull the old man from the cart Thomas screamed at them to stop, at first in Latin and then, as he became more and more angry at the scholars and concerned for Roger's safety, in English and in languages he scarcely remembered he knew. The scholars took no notice of him. The older students, and even the most respectable of the friars and churchmen, were so excited at the prospect of hearing the great doctor that they behaved as rashly as the teenagers.

Soon brother Roger was borne aloft, on the shoulders of the scholars, towards the schoolroom, leaving Thomas standing in the empty cart.

By the time Thomas had found a relatively quiet alley in which to tether the donkey, the street outside the Italian house was peaceful. All the scholars had crammed themselves into the upstairs schoolroom, as Thomas found when he ran up the stairs only to be met by a solid phalanx of scholarly backs blocking the door. As he elbowed his way into the room he could hear brother Roger's voice: the old man had already started his lecture.

Thomas found himself a place at the edge of the room from which he could watch the audience and, if necessary, create a diversion. He forced himself to listen to brother Roger's talk: he had heard the same stuff several times before but he knew that Roger became carried away by his own enthusiasm, and it was vital that the old man said nothing about his recent, clandestine researches. If he did, Thomas would have to intervene.

Most of the scholars, too, knew what to expect. Thomas recognised several who had attended previous lectures given by the infamous doctor. They were here for the titillation of hearing dangerous doctrines, and brother Roger did not disappoint them.

The old man's voice seemed to gather strength as he spoke, and the murmurs of outrage that began to rise from among the crowd served only to spur him on. Brother Roger usually seemed much older than his sixty years; now, as he stood on the platform at one end of the room, his thin body rigid, his fingers jabbing the air for emphasis, his voice rising above the increasing hubbub, he appeared in the prime of his life.

Thomas was relieved that there was nothing new in brother Roger's teachings. He started uncontroversially, describing his observations of the heavenly bodies, and then giving an overview of the properties of lenses and prisms. It was when he combined the resulting ideas that the murmuring began. Just as light produces emanations of itself, he declared, spreading outwards from the source of itself with no lessening of its vigour, and being transformed into visible light again when it reaches any body in its path, so the heavenly bodies, including the sun and the Earth itself, produce emanations of themselves that influence all the other heavenly bodies.

At this point, just as his voice reached a peak of volume and rapidity and his theories seemed about to venture on to dangerous ground, brother Roger stopped. He swung his head from left to right, glaring at his audience with glittering eyes.

'You take the ancient philosophers as your authorities,' he accused the scholars. 'You read, and you dispute, and you think you understand. But there can be no understanding without experience,' he shouted. 'Any proposition of natural philosophy that cannot be tested is worthless. Even if it is attested to by generations of wise men; even if it has the authority of holy writ; even if it is true; it is of no value to the philosopher if it has not been subjected to the test of empiricism.'

This was too much for some of the older schoolmen, who began to try to interrupt the flow of brother Roger's cascade of words. Some of the younger scholars, taking Bacon's side more out of mischief-making than from conviction, began to cheer at the end of each of his sentences.

Thomas sighed. He had heard it all before.

Ignoring the noise and tumult, brother Roger extended a bony hand and pointed at one of his detractors. ‘Walter of Naresham,’ he crowed, ‘do you dare to criticise me? You were a fat-headed gut-worm when I taught you in Paris, and you’ve grown fatter-headed and more wormy with each passing year.’

It’s well known that you achieved your doctorate only because your father greased the old chancellor’s palm.’

The object of brother Roger’s attack went red in the face with anger and appeared about to explode. But Roger had finished with him, and had launched into an equally vituperative and slanderous diatribe against another scholar.

Within minutes some of the older schoolmen were yelling abuse at - him, while a few were trying to push through the crowd to confront him. Others were trying to quieten and restrain the most obstreperous, and the schoolroom resembled a beer-house at the end of a feast day rather than a place of instruction and learning.

Thomas saw that brother Roger had a thin smile on his face. The old man had few opportunities to create a stir these days – Thomas saw to that – but when given his head he made sure his appearances were memorable. It was almost as if he wanted to draw attention to himself.

Eventually the noise subsided, but voices were raised again almost as soon as brother Roger resumed speaking. ‘The sun,’ he declared, ‘is the source of all light. That is easily proved by examining the phenomenon of a solar eclipse. And every night, when one side of the Earth turns away from the sun, there is darkness, apart from the sun’s light reflected from the moon, and the planets, and the distant stars.’

The end of his sentence was drowned under a wave of shouts and protests. The schoolmen, waving their fists, yelled,

‘Rubbish!’; the churchmen hissed, ‘Heresy!’

Brother Roger folded his arms and waited for the turmoil to abate. Into the silence a voice spoke. ‘Doctor Bacon is quite right, you know. I’ve spent a lifetime – well, several –

observing the heavens, and I’m afraid it’s clear that the Earth and all the planets revolve around the sun. Just as the moon circles the Earth. It’s not a newfangled notion, after all. Have none of you studied the theories of Pythagoras?’

It was the Doctor. Thomas couldn't understand how he had failed until now to notice him in the audience. Thomas shook his head. Two doctors exchanging heretical opinions.

As if one wasn't enough.

'And the stars are very distant, I think you'll find.' The Doctor, whose voice was as loud and flamboyant as its producer's appearance, went on relentlessly.

Brother Roger's face was shining with excitement.

Thomas had not seen him as animated as this for several years.

'I have calculated that the sphere of the stars is four million miles away from us,' he called to the Doctor.

'Further, much further,' the Doctor replied, fuelling more outraged shouting from the audience.

The lecture promised to become even more entertaining than brother Roger's usually were, but Thomas had other things on his mind. The Doctor, he noted, was alone. Where, then, was brother Alfric?

Thomas wasn't foolish enough to leave anything in brother Roger's cell that could reveal Roger's secret activities.

Nonetheless he hated to leave the cell unattended, and it worried him that the proctor was at large, and engaged in some work so important that he had left the Doctor to wander alone.

He was racked with indecision. Brother Roger and the Doctor were occupied. He had to hope that Roger would not say anything to incriminate himself. He slid along the wall, towards the door. No one saw him leave.

A breeze stirred the pennants on the surrounding towers and freshened the warm air in the bailey. With some of the garrison troops out on patrol with Richard, and the remainder polishing their weapons and armour in their barrack-room, the castle was given over to quiet domesticity.

Nyssa sat in the shade of a wooden, rose-smothered bower while Matilda, in a wide-brimmed hat, supervised the work of her gardeners. The rector of St George's church was dozing in the chair he had set against the southern wall of his nave.

Women had brought some of the tapestries and hangings from the keep and, having hung them from lines of rope, were beating dust from them.

Nyssa had nothing to do but sit and watch. It was an unfamiliar experience. She couldn't remember the last time she had been so inactive. It seemed as though she had been doing, or planning to do, or worrying about not doing, ever since she had ceased to be a child. To escape from the pressure of her work she had always simply transferred her energies to other, different, work: a new aid project, or teaching, or research, or exploring the mountains. She had never been without an objective; usually, she reflected, there had been a long list of objectives.

Now the horizon of her world was the brightly painted curtain wall of the castle bailey. Her magnificently embroidered gown, one of several lent to her by Matilda, made any strenuous activity impractical. In any case, there were gardeners, servants, serfs, tradesmen, craftsmen, carters, porters, laundrywomen and seamstresses to do what little work was required. None of them bothered Nyssa: they took their instructions from Matilda, the head of the household. There were no colleagues keen to discuss work; no students seeking guidance; no friends requiring reassurance; not even an artificial intelligence to be directed.

It felt to Nyssa as though the wall that encircled the garden delimited a zone of emptiness within which she could at last breathe easily.

She felt the sun, warm on her shoulders. She heard the gardeners' forks crunch into the soil, the thwack of the beating-rods against the tapestries, the trilling of birds in the trees above her head, the flapping of the flags on the towers.

She smelt the scent of the roses hanging in the bower around her. And she felt as though a great coiled spring inside her was being relaxed and released.

Matilda, fanning her face with her hand, turned and walked towards the bower. Nyssa smiled as she approached: Matilda was the perfect hostess – kind, thoughtful, generous and undemanding – and Nyssa was happy to share the seat with her.

'Do you have a garden, Nyssa,' Matilda said, 'on your family's estates?'

This was the first time she had asked Nyssa anything about her background, and it was the most discreet of questions.

‘My father,’ Nyssa began, and then paused as she realised that if she was not careful she would release an avalanche of memories and emotions. ‘My father kept extensive gardens,’

she said, ‘while my mother was alive. I remember avenues of trees with golden leaves. There were lakes, with islands of flowers, and fountains.’

‘Lakes!’ Matilda exclaimed. ‘With fountains. What a splendid idea.’ She cast her gaze around the bailey. ‘But the moat runs outside the walls, of course. Perhaps I could have a channel dug to create a lake there, in front of the south tower.

But it would be a small thing, no doubt, compared to the many lakes in your father’s gardens.’

Nyssa had not intended her childhood recollections to disparage Matilda’s achievement. ‘And I suspect the King might not approve of you undermining his fortifications.’ She placed her hand on Matilda’s sleeve. ‘This garden is perfection, Matilda. It reminds me of my home when I was a child. I feel at peace here.’

Matilda evidently felt pleased with the compliment, and encouraged to continue with her gentle interrogation. ‘I sense, Nyssa, that you have not been at peace for a long time.’

Nyssa sighed. ‘A very, very long time.’

‘I know how it feels to lose someone,’ Matilda said. Nyssa assumed the young widow was referring to her husband. ‘Like you, although no doubt from a different cause, I carry in my breast an aching heart. I suppose it was in an attempt to forget that I devoted myself to creating this garden of love. Now that it is finished I find it helps me to remember. But in remembering, my heart is eased.’

Nyssa’s gaze took in the tall, strong walls that enclosed the garden and kept the ‘world’ outside it. No one knew her; no one wanted anything from her; no one could find her here. It was a refuge: a place of safety and peace. ‘I think your garden will ease my heart, too,’ she said.

‘I’m sure it will,’ Matilda said. Her voice was once again bright and playful. ‘I know what will mend your heart, my dear, and I have no doubt you will find it here. We have the panacea within these ramparts. Growing the flower is merely the first and easiest of the gardener’s chores. Next comes pollination and then, if Venus smiles on us, the setting and ripening of the fruit.’

Nyssa wondered, briefly, why Matilda was looking so coy and conspiratorial as she spoke. But the sunshine was making her drowsy, and she didn't want to think about anything but the scent of the roses. She had found a safe haven. That was all that mattered.

There were no trees on the little island, and therefore there was no shade in which to leave the boat that Alfric had borrowed from the miller. The sun seemed to be directly overhead: Alfric squinted in the glare reflected from the surface of the river, and sweated in his heavy habit as he worked the oars.

It was just as well, he thought, that he wasn't trying to conceal his movements. A grey friar trying to manoeuvre a small boat in the middle of the Thames on a summer's afternoon was an unusual sight, and Alfric felt very exposed, even though there was no one crossing Castle Bridge and the ramparts above the river appeared to be unmanned.

He had set off on this mission as soon as he had parted company with the Doctor outside St Ebbe's church. The Doctor had assured him that he could find the Italian school on his own, and had marched off eastwards along Pennyfarthing Street. As soon as the Doctor's distinctive thicket of curly hair had disappeared into the market-day throng, Alfric had made off in the opposite direction, towards the West Gate. Outside the town walls he had continued along the Faringdon road, with the castle moat and walls on his right and the Franciscan gardens on his left. He had stopped on Castle Bridge, and had peered over the parapet: the Thames, fast flowing in this channel, streamed around the green-slimed stone pillars of the bridge. You could hide a small boat under the bridge, he had decided, although it would have to be soundly secured. And the rowing upstream would be hard.

Once he had descended from the bridge he had arrived on the largest of the islands that separated the Thames into four channels under the west walls of the castle. Here Oxford town always seemed very distant, even though the larger islands, and the parish of St Thomas beyond them, were thick with houses and smallholdings. Compared to the bustle of the town, however, and separated from it by the walled castle on its hill, St Thomas's parish felt, sounded and smelt entirely rural.

Castle Mill, set on its own island and connected by a stone bridge to the castle's westernmost tower, was the only building in sight that was not dwarfed by the might of the castle. Constructed from the same

dark yellow stone, it looked like a massive outcrop of the fortifications. Three storeys high and as solid as a keep it straddled one of the river streams, and rumbling continuously in its bowels was a mill-wheel twice as tall as a man. It was by far the biggest of the town's four mills, and most of the townspeople had their corn ground there.

The miller was a surly man, but Alfric's promise of two trout from the friary ponds had secured the loan of the small boat. The current had carried the boat and Alfric beneath Castle Bridge, under which Alfric did indeed find several boats tied up to the pontoons, and south away from the castle, with the Franciscan gardens on the left bank, to the narrow arrowhead point of Castle Bridge Island. Here the channels of the Thames converged, then flowed around the islet on which the young Roger Bacon had built his observatory, only to divide again as Trill Mill stream diverged from the river.

Alfric lifted the oars out of the swirling water and rested his forearms on them. As there was no hope of finding a shady mooring he let the current carry the boat round the islet, and then lowered the oars and once again fought against the river's flow to bring the boat up to the muddy shore.

Here, in the lea of the current, he found in the foreshore's mud a round inlet of deep water and next to it, on the grassy bank, a mooring-post. As he hitched the boat's rope to the post, Alfric noticed that, although it was so old and weathered that it looked like the rotting stump of a tree, the post showed signs of recent use. The short path of flattened grass that led from the shore to the door of the derelict building also indicated that the house had received visitors.

Alfric cautioned himself not to jump to conclusions. There were many reasons why people might choose to row to this isolated mound in the middle of the river. No doubt the fishing was good. And he himself, when a young stoneworker, had sought out similar private places when he had been in the company of young women. On the other hand the island's ghostly reputation would be enough to keep most people away.

Alfric wondered whose property the islet was. Had it belonged to Bacon before he became a friar, or had he paid rent for it? Perhaps it had belonged, or still belonged, to a kinsman of his. It was odd that no one talked about it: it was only a small island, but it was fertile and near the town, and therefore it had some value. On joining any order of friars a man was obliged to divest himself of all his possessions; the

dark suspicion began to form in Alfric's mind that brother Roger had somehow failed to relinquish ownership of the islet and the observatory or, even more scandalously, had been allowed by Hubert's predecessor to retain his title to the place.

Alfric resisted the temptation to try the door. Instead he walked around the entire building and, although it covered most of the firm ground on the islet, he stood as far back from it as he could in order to assess its size, shape and construction.

As he did so he was aware that this methodical, practical approach owed nothing to the learning he had acquired since donning the grey robes of the Franciscans. Nothing he had read in the works of Aristotle or Augustine – nothing he had found in any book – had provided him with intellectual tools that could help him to investigate brother Godwin's murder.

Instead, he realised, he was shaping his thoughts in the same way that, years ago, he used to cut stone, and chisel blocks to shape, and build them one on top of the other to create structures.

Was it sinful, he wondered, to ignore the rules of Francis, and the teachings of the fathers of the Church, and the writings of the ancient philosophers? He was treating Godwin's death as no more than a problem to be solved: a search for a misplaced gutter or missing roof-slate. He knew, also, that he was following the example set by the Doctor – and he suspected that the Doctor's methods, and his entire philosophy, had little grounding in holy scripture or the teachings of the saints. And, as a final irony, he was aware that in relying on observation and practical experience rather than on precedent and ancient teachings he was obeying the injunctions of the most infamous and nearly heretical of living scholars: brother Roger Bacon.

He shrugged. He couldn't make himself forget the skills he had learnt as a stonemason and builder. And, apart from enabling him to recognise that brother Roger's old observatory was a cube surmounted by the upper half of an octahedron, the philosophers, from Plato to Grosseteste, could provide no assistance. Alfric pushed his misgivings to the back of his mind and considered the old observatory as part of a practical problem.

The building was big, and its square ground-plan was set on stone foundations. If brother Roger had paid to have it built, then there had to be truth in the stories that he came from a wealthy family. Each of the four corners was a column of rectangular stone blocks. The walls

were timber-framed, and the wattle and daub within the framework had been rendered, although much of the rendering was now crumbling off. There were two shuttered windows set high in each wall. The roof was unconventional: thatch would have been usual or, given the size and expense of the building, slate tiles or sheets of lead. This roof was a four-sided pyramid that, as far as Alfric could see, had been constructed in much the same way as the walls: a timber framework, filled out with wattle and daub and covered with canvas and pitch. It was no surprise to Alfric that the roof had evidently not proved to be weatherproof: he could see patches where the canvas had been torn away by high winds and the material beneath had collapsed to leave holes.

The other unusual feature of the roof was that in each of its four sloping sides was set a narrow window of glass.

For looking at the heavens, Alfric realised.

It was, in sum, a big, expensive, strange, ugly, dilapidated structure. Now, in the dry, hot, summer sunshine, it looked dusty and brittle, and merely odd. Alfric could imagine, however, that in the winter rains, when the river rose and sheets of drizzle blew across the valley, it would appear sodden and miserable; and at night it would loom threateningly out of the water, its man-made, four-square bulk an affront to the natural order.

It had only one door, in the south wall, its wood cracked from the effects of sun and rain. But it hung securely on three hinges that showed no rust. The lock was on the inside, but Alfric could see through the keyhole that it was oiled. And, curiously, there were two simple bolts on the outside of the door: thin cylinders of metal that could be slid into holes that had been drilled into the stone doorframe. The bolts looked to Alfric as though they had been fitted recently, and like the lock they were oiled. When he pushed the upper bolt it slid easily into place. His fingers slipped on the oiled metal as he struggled to pull it back.

Why, Alfric wondered, would anyone put bolts on the outside of a door? They wouldn't prevent someone on the outside from getting in. The only answer he could come up with was: to keep someone or something from getting out.

The bolts were drawn back, so only the lock was keeping the door closed. Alfric drew from one of his pockets the key brother Simon had made for him. As a builder and carver in stone Alfric had learnt how

to make and copy a plan drawn on parchment. He knew the importance of drawing to scale, and in proportion: skills that were not needed by the decorators of manuscripts and the painters of saints on church walls. He had, therefore, been able to draw a plan of the key he had found during his first search of brother Roger's cell (and which he had not found again during subsequent searches), and brother Simon, the friary's smith, had been able to forge a copy.

For over a year Alfric had resisted the temptation to find a lock that the key would fit. Brother Godwin's death was enough to tip the scales: investigation now outweighed discretion.

The head of the key slid through the keyhole and into the lock. Alfric turned it, and felt the oiled mechanism move slowly but easily. The door swung outwards.

Alfric took a deep breath and stepped through the doorway. He entered a small antechamber, empty but for a wooden spiral of steps leading upwards. He pushed through a second door. The interior of the building consisted of just one large room, with a gallery running around all four walls.

Although the windows were shuttered, the oblong of sunlight coming through the doorway and rays slanting in through the holes in the roof provided illumination for Alfric to see what was in brother Roger's abandoned observatory.

He had been expecting to find a workroom littered with books and papers. Instead he realised that he was in a library.

All four walls were lined with shelves, and every shelf was crammed with books: most were bound in leather, but some were closely rolled parchments and others were roughly cut sheets tied together.

Alfric had never seen so many books in one room. The collection was three times the size of the library in the friary, which was said to be the best Franciscan library in England.

His imagination reeled as he attempted to estimate the value of such a collection. It was impossible: it was a repository of knowledge beyond monetary value. And, he realised, as he pulled a volume from a shelf, it was worthless: the paper, subjected to years of damp winters and hot summers, was crumbling. Texts in Latin, Greek and Arabic were being destroyed by time and the elements. He walked around the perimeter of the room, pulling bound bundles of pages from the shelves at random. Aristotle; Avicenna; Ptolemy; Euclid; Averroes; al-

Kindi; Pliny; al-Farabi. All stained with rot, and now as dry and fragile as the shed skins of insects.

Surrounded by the mote-filled silence, Alfric hardly dared to breathe. One sound, it seemed, or one sudden movement, would be enough to bring down the creaking shelves and their crumbling contents. The loss of so many books would be a desecration. But he knew that the paper was past saving. This was less sudden, less spectacular, and no doubt less important than the burning of the great library of Alexandria, but the collection of books was as completely destroyed. He was standing in the ghost of a library. He was glad that only he was here to see it: some of his brothers, he suspected, loved learning more than they loved the order, or the rule of its founder, or the holy writ itself, and their grief on seeing this would have been unbounded.

He sighed, and turned away. Within the vast square of the room the tiled floor was covered with tables. And under, beside and on every table there were papers, books, drawings, charts, mechanical devices and arrays of apparatus. Just as the perimeter library quite clearly contained every text brother Roger had collected, so the interior space contained everything he had written, drawn, constructed or pieced together. It was all covered in a thick layer of dust.

Alfric wandered into the midst of the chaos. He picked up a page of writing: his Latin was good, but he had difficulty following the complex reasoning about the multiplication of likenesses. He looked at a pile of papers, on the floor, that came up to his thighs: each one was covered in columns of tiny numerals. He picked up a contraption consisting of two circles of glass held side by side in a framework of twisted wire; when he placed the thing in front of his face, so that he could look through the glass circles, everything in the room seemed to move away from him and become sharp-edged.

Then he saw something that made him run to inspect it.

Lying on a pile of correspondence, as if discarded thoughtlessly, was an unfurled letter carrying the papal seal and ribbon. Alfric didn't dare touch it, but he couldn't avoid reading it. It was a missive from the Holy Father in Rome. Its words encouraged brother Roger to write again, and to outline more of his speculations and his proposals for teaching the kinds of knowledge that would be required to defeat the forces of the Antichrist.

The letter was dated. It had been written only twelve years previously; in 1266. Here was incontrovertible proof that brother Roger, almost

ten years after subjecting himself to the rules of the Franciscans, had flagrantly abused the minister and the entire order. Alfric was not surprised. And now, of course, he knew why the *Doctor Mirabilis*, when he had exhausted his wealth, had chosen to immure himself among the Oxford Franciscans when any religious house in Christendom would have welcomed him: only the Oxford Franciscans had land adjacent to the observatory islet.

The trouble with friars in general, Alfric thought, and with us followers of Francis in particular, is that we think the best of people.

But brother Roger had never had any intention of abiding by the rules of the order. The minister-general of the Franciscans had decreed at Narbonne that friars were not to own books: yet brother Roger had worked here surrounded by his private library. Friars were forbidden to write to the papal court, other than through the minister of their house: brother Roger had written to the pope himself, in secret. And how many of the books lying half-finished on every surface, Alfric wondered, had Roger written after the Council of Narbonne forbade friars from writing new texts?

But everything here was old, covered in a patina of dust and mould. The fact that Roger Bacon had disobeyed rules and instructions more than a decade previously was not, perhaps, so very important. Hubert's predecessor as minister had been less strict than Hubert: circumstances had been different in those days, and the Dominicans had been less assiduous in seeking out heresy and error. Roger Bacon had been, and still was, the most distinguished scholar in Christendom. Perhaps the minister had ignored brother Roger's foibles and flouting of regulations in order to enjoy the prestige of having him in the order.

What Alfric needed was evidence that brother Roger was still, in spite of Hubert's direct commands, failing to submit to the rules and customs of the Franciscans. And as he looked around the grey, musty, decrepit piles on the tables he realised that everything in the room suggested the opposite: that brother Roger had ceased to work here many years previously.

Alfric wandered from table to table. On one he found a heap of papers on which brother Roger had drawn pictures: a series of discs representing lenses, with rays of light passing through them; a mechanical contraption with wings like a bat's; a cylindrical machine with the description 'submersible boat'. From another table he took a metal tube containing discs of glass: when he put one end of it to his

eye he saw nothing until his finger strayed close to the other end, and then he saw the lines and ridges of his fingertip as if they were chasms and mountain ranges.

And then he was standing at a table that was clear of dust and grime. The ink in the inkwell was still wet. Most of the surface of the table was covered in a bewildering arrangement of glass flasks and tubes. They were clean and had recently been used. Alfric thought the apparatus resembled the equipment needed for the distillation of spirits and his heart, having risen into his throat with excitement, felt weighed down with disappointment: could it be that, after all, brother Roger's only sin was that he had a secret distillery for the production of strong drinks?

The small part of the table that was unencumbered with glassware had on it a pile of papers. These, too, were free from dust and had recently been written: brother Roger had dated each page of minuscule writing.

Alfric picked up a sheet and held it in a ray of sunlight.

The text was in Latin, as he had expected, and was full of abbreviations and technical terms that made it impossible to comprehend it. Here there was a diagram of an arrangement of glass vessels; there a list of ingredients. But the title was clear enough: *Elixir Vitae* – the Elixir of Life. Alfric closed his eyes and muttered a prayer of thanks. Brother Roger was dabbling in arcane and irreligious arts.

Alfric collected up the sheaf of papers. He held in his hands the evidence Hubert wanted. It would be enough to justify disciplining brother Roger, to the point of keeping him imprisoned, so that he could no longer continue with his philosophical works and writings. But Bacon's reputation as a scholar would remain intact, and would continue to redound to the advantage of the Franciscan order. He might even be permitted to teach occasionally in the university. And the Dominicans would be foiled, because Hubert would have demonstrated that the Franciscans could deal with their own problems. Above all, and much to Alfric's relief, it would not be necessary to contrive a case against brother Roger, or to implicate him in the dreadful business of brother Godwin's death. That matter remained to be resolved, but with brother Roger's alchemical writings tucked tightly under his arm Alfric was satisfied that the Roger Bacon problem would soon be dealt with.

Oswald sat on a clump of grass with his sandals in his lap. The sun

was hot on his tonsured head, and his bare feet were cooled by the swiftly flowing waters of the Trill Mill stream.

Behind him were the gardens of the friary; before him, on the other bank of the stream, were fields and orchards and animal pens, all belonging to the secular world from which he had retreated years previously,

There was no one in Sight. He was alone. Tears of misery and confusion ran down his cheeks as he silently sobbed. If the waters had been deeper he would have thrown himself into them. The price of self-slaughter was eternal damnation, but could eternal damnation be any worse than this?

Godwin was dead.

Oswald had been the third son of a knight, and destined for the Church; Godwin a journeyman cooper. Neither had had much to lose, in terms of property or expectations. They had been young men, and lusty and full of bravado. At the end of only their second night together, on the floor among the wood shavings in the cooper's shop, they had vowed that they would rather lose everything they owned than give up each other.

It had been Godwin's idea to join a religious brotherhood.

At the time it had seemed the obvious thing to do. In the secular world they could meet only in secret; the difference in rank between them meant that any open association was out of the question; and Oswald's position and Godwin's craft would separate them. In a friary or monastery they could remain together, and in a closed society of men no one would wonder that they avoided the company of women.

And so they had joined the Franciscan order, and had come to Oxford to be schooled, and had remained -there. And for a few years they had been happy.

Oswald couldn't remember, now, when Godwin had started his nocturnal visits to the wine cellar. Was it before or after their first argument? It didn't matter. By then they had already known that the new chancellor of the university had somehow discovered their secret, and they found themselves obliged to spy on the brotherhood that had given them sanctuary. Philip of Seaby didn't judge or criticise them: in fact Oswald sometimes wondered whether the chancellor himself had once been in thrall to an unnatural attraction. And all Philip wanted from them was information.

But the friary no longer seemed like a retreat: it was a prison. Oswald and Godwin, who as young men had been united in love, found themselves bound together by fear and suspicion and guilt.

And now Godwin was dead... murdered. And everyone knew that Oswald and Godwin used to argue and fight; everyone knew that Godwin used to help himself at night from the minister's wine casks, and that Oswald could often be found with him in the wine cellars. Oswald was sure he would be accused of the crime. And how could he defend himself?

Telling the truth was impossible.

Today, when he had been summoned to see the minister Oswald had assumed he would be charged with the murder.

Only cowardice and indecision had prevented him from throwing himself from the window of his cell.

In the scriptorium, however, sitting in his tall chair, brother Hubert had hardly glanced at him, and had made no comment about the bruises on his face. The paper in Hubert's hand was not a warrant for Oswald's arrest, but a letter from Matilda, the lady of the castle. Her grandfather, it emerged, had known Oswald's father, and as she was in need of advice concerning her garden, and as Oswald was the friary's expert in such matters, she requested that Oswald be sent to her.

'She's a de Marenne,' Hubert had said, 'and they're related to the Seaby family. The chancellor's kin. So mind what you say, brother Oswald. I don't like the chancellor knowing our business. Well, that's all, brother. Have you been struck dumb? You may go to see the lady Matilda. Oh, and I was sorry to hear about brother Godwin. I know you knew him well. A terrible accident.'

Did the minister really believe that Godwin's death had been an accident, in spite of what Oswald had heard brother Alfric and the Doctor say? Did he really not know that Oswald and Godwin had known each other more than merely 'well'?

Did he suspect that Oswald was secretly in the service of the chancellor? There was no way Oswald could divine how much the minister knew.

But, as he had walked from the scriptorium in a daze, Oswald had seen a glimmer of hope. He had felt like a drowning man who had

been thrown a rope. He had known at once that the letter from the castle was a ruse of the chancellor's, and that his visit to the castle had nothing to do with gardening. The chancellor wanted to know what was going on in the friary. And perhaps – just perhaps – the chancellor might be persuaded to protect his one remaining informant from being blamed for Godwin's death. Because Oswald was sure of one thing: it was only a matter of time before he was accused.

The more Oswald thought about it, the lower the flame of his hope burned. Although the minister had called Godwin's death an accident, Oswald knew that his deputy, brother Alfric, assisted by the Doctor, was treating it as a murder.

Someone, soon, would have to be blamed. And why would the chancellor exert himself to save Oswald from such accusations?

And so, instead of setting off for the castle, Oswald had wandered out of the friary into the gardens, and through the orchard, and past the fish ponds, until he reached the stream.

At the back of his mind, and nearly obscured by the waves of despair that swept through him, was the idea that he should go to the old observatory. Brother Alfric and the Doctor had seemed to think it was significant. And Oswald knew no one ever went there. If he could find out something, then perhaps his report might pique the chancellor's interest.

At the water's edge he realised the futility of his idea. The stream flowed quickly here, beside the friary gardens; upriver, where the observatory sat on its little island among the swirling waters of the Thames, the currents were treacherous.

Even if he could swim, he wouldn't risk it. The whole idea was absurd. He sat down, and let his feet dangle in the water.

He remembered Godwin. The first time he saw him, riding past the cooper's shop. The first time Godwin touched him.

And he began to cry.

A movement caught his eye as he wiped his face with his sleeve. There was someone on the little island. Oswald shielded his eyes with his hand and peered upstream.

It was brother Alfric. His tall frame and black hair were unmistakable. He had been in the observatory. He was carrying something: a bundle

of papers. He had a small boat.

Where was he going? What had he found in the derelict building?

Oswald buckled his sandals on to his wet feet. Crouching, he ran a little way into the orchard: so that he could not be seen from the river. And then he moved slowly through the trees, towards the place where the stream diverged from the river, where brother Alfric was trying to row against the current. He waited and watched. He would follow Alfric, and find out what the papers were. He might, after all, have something of interest to report to the chancellor.

The grey slates were as hot as a griddle. Thomas was able to shelter from the sun in the shade of the chimney but, whenever he moved, and had to extend a hand to steady himself, he touched the hot slates and cursed.

He had been on the friary roof most of the afternoon. It was a favourite haunt of his – whenever the weather was fair, and he could be sure brother Roger was hard at work, and he had excused himself from attendance at prayers in church.

From the roof of the chapter-house he could see northwards into the town, as far as the towers of the town wall on the far side; westwards he could see upriver as far as the castle mill, beyond which the river was hidden from his view behind the walls of the castle. With a twist and a slide and a curse as his hand touched the slates, he could turn to see southwards: across the friary gardens, and beyond them the meadows and orchards, and the river running between them. Only towards the east was his view blocked, by the roof and tower of the friary church.

Thomas liked to sit on the roof because from his perch he could watch the friars and the townspeople go about their business. He found the view informative. But more informative still was the chimney. And this was because among the devices that he often brought with him was an invention of brother Roger's that allowed Thomas to peer down the flue.

It was a simple thing: a long tube, with a sloping mirror at each end. The subtlety of the device lay in the slight curvature of the glass, which allowed the viewer to see in the upper mirror a clear, though tiny, image of whatever was presented before the lower mirror.

The chimney Thomas was clinging to carried smoke, in winter, from the scriptorium. And that was convenient for Thomas, because brother

Hubert liked to hold his private meetings in the scriptorium.

From time to time Thomas turned from his view of the town and applied an eye to the end of the tube, in order to see whether Hubert was using the room. Now, when he looked, he saw movement.

A diminutive image of brother Hubert appeared in the glass. He was followed by brother Alfric, who was carrying a bundle.

If only, Thomas thought, brother Roger could be encouraged to create a device that could transmit sound. Still, it was clear that the minister and the proctor were engaged in animated conversation. The subject was the bundle that Alfric had carried in. And, as he watched, Thomas realised what he was seeing. Brother Alfric had stolen the Elixir manuscript: there could be no other explanation. Thomas recognised the papers.

For a moment he was too shocked to think. His mind went blank. The implications were too awful to contemplate. It wasn't just the theft of the work, and the loss of so much difficult and painstaking research. Hubert, Thomas knew, had little interest in the content of the manuscript: as far as he was concerned it was merely a piece of evidence that he could use to control and confine the troublesome brother Roger. But that, from Thomas's viewpoint, was as bad as the loss of the work: the research was incomplete, and he wanted brother Roger to be free to finish it.

Thomas decided, almost without thinking about it, that he would have to retrieve the papers.

He saw the small image of brother Alfric disappear-at the edge of the glass. He had left the scriptorium. He saw Hubert collect the papers and tuck them under his arm; then he, too, left.

Thomas extracted the tube from the chimney, pulled it into its component sections, and packed it away in its bag. He smiled. He knew what he had to do.

The refectory was, if anything, noisier than usual. The warm weather had done nothing to abate the friars' appetites, and every seat along the long, narrow tables was occupied – except for the chair at the centre of the top table. The minister was late for supper, and the brothers were becoming restive.

It was at supper that Alfric sometimes wished that, when issuing his precepts, the revered Francis had copied the rule of silence that

prevailed in the monastic orders. As the friars exchanged gossip, and reports about the egg-laying performance of the chickens and ducks, and opinions about Neoplatonist philosophy, the cacophony in the refectory echoed from the stone walls and the roof timbers.

The kitchen staff, with their greasy aprons and red faces, were clustered in the doorways. Their work was done, and no doubt the dishes of bread, beans and vegetables they had prepared were growing cold as they waited for the signal to begin serving.

One of the friars stood and strode towards Alfric. ‘Brother Alfric,’ he said, ‘where is the minister? I’ve never known him to be this late.’

‘We’re all hungry, brother,’ Alfric replied. ‘But let’s show a little Christian fortitude, shall we? I’m sure brother Hubert heard the bell, and if he’s late it can only be because he has to attend to an urgent matter. Be seated.’

The friar frowned, and as he returned to his place on the bench he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture that told the entire assembly that his mission to initiate eating had proved fruitless.

Alfric could guess why Hubert was late: he imagined the minister, in his cell, lost in a study of the complex alchemical text Alfric had brought to him. That was, Alfric thought, the only possible reason for his tardiness. It couldn’t be that he was in a meeting with any of the brothers: as far as Alfric could see, every one of the friars was sitting impatiently in the refectory.

Even those who had not attended church for prayers at vespers - the usual absentees, including brother Roger, his apprentice Thomas, brother Oswald, and the Doctor – had appeared for supper. The spirit, Alfric reflected, was often weak, but the flesh was usually willing, at least when food was involved.

Brother Oswald, Alfric noted, appeared more animated than he had for days. Oswald was usually to be found in the gardens, but Alfric realised that he had not seen the friar, other than at prayers, for several days. And even then Oswald had appeared hooded, and had spoken to no one. Now, though, he was chatting amiably with his neighbours. His hood was thrown back, and his face was flushed and his eyes were glittering.

It was no surprise to Alfric that brother Oswald had been withdrawn after Godwin’s death. Although the two friars had been constantly bickering, or worse, they had spent a lot of time together and Alfric

had always suspected that their enmity was more apparent than real. On the other hand, of course, it was always possible that one of their arguments had got out of hand, that Oswald had killed Godwin in a fit of anger, and that he was merry now because he thought he had escaped suspicion.

That would make for a convenient closure of the mystery, in any case, Alfric mused. Now that Hubert had the Elixir papers, there was little point in continuing to try to associate brother Roger with the murder of brother Godwin. And Oswald would make a believable culprit.

Alfric sighed. Some of the tasks he was called on to perform for the good of the order were distinctly not Christian.

If brother Oswald had concluded, after days of doubt and fear, that he was finally free from suspicion, it was ironic that Alfric was now, for the first time, considering him as the possible murderer.

Alfric felt his stomach rumble, and his thoughts returned to immediate problems. He turned to his left, where the Doctor was engaged in a loud dispute with brother Adam about the merits of Pythagoras.

‘Doctor,’ Alfric said, ‘I’m sorry to interrupt, but we should talk. And, as I can hardly hear myself speak in all this bellowing, I think we can talk securely until the minister arrives. I have news about brother Roger.’

‘Jolly good,’ the Doctor said. His voice rang out clearly over the hubbub, and Alfric gestured to him to lower it. ‘An excellent lecture,’ the Doctor said, more quietly. ‘Philosophy with fisticuffs. A potent combination. It would seem that *Doctor Mirabilis* has lost none of his vigour.’

‘Indeed he has not,’ Alfric said. ‘That’s what I have to tell you. I’ve found -’

‘He and I walked back to the friary together,’ the Doctor said, interrupting Alfric’s speech with deliberation, as if his words were particularly significant. ‘It was just as well he’s fitter than he looks. Brother Thomas and the donkey cart were nowhere to be seen.’

Alfric glanced across the room to where brother Roger was sitting next to brother Thomas. The older man was listening intently to the conversation all around him. He had a smile on his gaunt face, and every now and then he interjected comments that appeared to cause amusement, consternation or anger among his neighbours. Thomas, in

contrast, looked glum and preoccupied.

‘That’s very interesting, Doctor,’ Alfric said, ‘but I think you’ll find my news more significant. This afternoon I discovered -’

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked round. Brother Peter was standing behind him.

‘Brother Alfric,’ Peter said, ‘where is the minister? He’s very late.’

Alfric put his hand to his head. ‘Why does everyone in this friary,’ he asked, ‘expect me to know where everyone else is?’

All right, all right! I’ll go and find brother Hubert. Doctor,’ he added, ‘we must talk later.’

‘Of course, of course,’ the Doctor said, as Alfric strode towards the hallway.

Alfric mounted the stairs from the hallway to the friars’

dorter, The receding noise from the refectory served to emphasise the silence that pervaded the rest of the friary. It was as quiet as it was during the darkest hours of the night, between midnight and matins. As quiet as the grave.

Alfric realised he had begun to walk on tiptoe and to whisper a prayer. He raised his voice, and brought his sandals slapping down on the stone steps. There was nothing to fear.

The rosy rays of the evening sun were flooding the corridors with light. The friary had been built only thirty years or so previously, and the colours and patterns on the walls glowed as if freshly painted.

Nonetheless, as Alfric approached the minister’s cell he felt a chill tremor of foreboding.

‘Brother Hubert!’ he called as he came to the door, and his voice echoed along the passage. There was no reply. The door, unusually, was shut.

Alfric rapped his knuckles against the wooden panel. The silence throughout the friary resumed, and was not interrupted by a reply from within the cell.

Tentatively Alfric pushed at the door. It was not latched, and swung open.

The minister's cell was like a ship that had been tossed by a gale. The bed, table and chair were overturned. The chest was open and its contents, along with the blankets from the bed and everything that had been arranged on the table, were strewn on the floor.

Hubert wasn't in the cell. Neither were the papers Alfric had taken from the observatory that afternoon.

Alfric stepped from the room, and pulled the door closed behind him. He stood in the corridor for a moment. He would tell the friars that the minister was ill. He would have supper served immediately: that would take the brothers' minds off Hubert's absence. And, he thought, as he hurried down the stairs, he would speak with the Doctor as soon as possible.

Chapter Five

Richard was still in his night-gown, splashing cold water on his face, when he heard running footsteps and a voice calling for him. 'Damnation,' he said, and set down his shaving-knife.

He strode to the door and threw it open, just as one of the chancellor's men staggered into view on the spiral staircase.

'Come quickly, sire,' the man gasped. 'And bring your men.'

There's a riot going on in town.'

Richard could hear footsteps and doors opening on the floor above. The chancellor's man had woken the ladies.

'Come in here,' Richard said. 'And keep your voice down.'

There's no need to alarm the household.'

The servant followed him into his chamber. Richard returned to the bowl of water and picked up his knife. Now that he was back among civilised people he made a point of rising early so that he could be sure of having time to wash and shave. Such things were expected at court, and he hoped Matilda and, particularly, Nyssa would notice that he took the trouble to make himself presentable. Now he would be lucky if he had time to scrape his chin.

'It's a bit early for a riot, isn't it?' he said to the chancellor's man as he tugged the blade across his face. 'Oh, hang it, this is going to take forever. Come here and do this for me, will you, while I get my gear

on.'

Richard was out of practice at shaving himself. In Wales he hadn't often bothered, and when he'd wanted a shave his squire had done it.

'Very well, sire,' the man said. 'But try to keep still. This knife's sharp.'

'And I won't quell many riots with a slit neck,' Richard said. He did his best to keep his head from moving as he pulled on his underclothes. That was another thing he wasn't used to: clean linen every day. Matilda seemed to have an army of washerwomen.

'I suppose I'd better wear full armour,' Richard said.

'What do you know about what's happening?'

'Not much, sire. There's a crowd in Fish Street. I didn't want to get too close. But they're angry about something.'

'Ouch!' Richard said, and put his hand to his cheek. 'I think that's enough shaving. Get downstairs, quietly, and rouse the garrison. Tell them to get up and into their livery. All of them. And to bring their halberds and knives. There'll be trouble for anyone of them who isn't ready by the time I'm downstairs. And,' he added, as the man made for the door,

'tell the stableboy to have my destrier saddled and ready.'

'Yes, sire,' the man said, and Richard plunged his raw face into the bowl of water.

As he pulled on his quilted shirt and leggings he reflected that his show of strength in the town the previous day had clearly done nothing to dampen the smouldering conflicts among the townspeople. On the chancellor's advice he had paid particular attention to the area around Fish Street: he'd marched his men up and down until he thought he'd pass out from the smell of fish emanating from the shops on all sides.

Fish Street was the westernmost boundary of the Jewish quarter, so the Hebrews were probably the cause of the disturbance today. But it could be the scholars again. Or a dispute among the shopkeepers.

Richard was grateful, though, in a way. In Wales he had become used to wearing full armour every day, and since leaving the principality he had missed the comforting weight of his mail suit. Now, as he covered

his head, torso, arms and legs with coif, hauberk and chausses, he felt himself becoming a warrior again. He was a man of flexible metal, invulnerable to all but the most cunning of knife thrusts and all but the most powerful of sword strokes. He struggled into his surcoat, buckled his sword-belt around his waist, and picked up his shield. He was ready.

And so, when he emerged from the keep's gateway, were his men and his horse.

'I'll take ten of you,' he shouted as he ran down the steps into the bailey. 'Wulfstim, pick three others from yesterday's squad and six more. Line up two abreast. The rest of you, stay here but be ready to come if I send for you. Alfred, you're in charge of the second team.'

Richard had made a point of learning the names of the garrison soldiers, and he knew which of them could be relied on.

His destrier neighed as he approached it. The horse, like him, seemed impatient with the quiet life of the castle and was keen to see some action. Richard pulled himself on to the saddle and addressed his men.

'There's some trouble in town,' he announced. 'We're going to stop it, remember, not to make it worse. So keep your knives sheathed and use your halberds as staves, as we practised yesterday. Stay calm, keep quiet. I'll do the talking.'

We'll go by way of Carfax – it's a longer way, but the streets are wide and I want everyone to be able to see us coming.

Cedric, carry the drum and beat a time for the men to march to. Wulfstan, carry the banner. Keep together, and keep close behind me. Let's go.'

The cobbled area outside the castle's barbican, which even at this early hour would normally be thronged with people and carts going to and from the West Gate, was almost empty.

Richard led his column along Great Bailey, where the pedestrians and flocks of animals parted at the sound of the drum and marching feet. At Carfax he turned right, down Fish Street, and immediately saw a crowd milling around the end of Jewry Lane. He turned to make sure his men were close behind.

'March on steadily,' he told Wulfstan, 'and beat that drum as loud as you can. I'll go ahead to see what's happening.' He urged his horse

forward, and its hooves clattered on the dry soil as it carried him towards the crowd.

He saw that the main body of the crowd was pressed into Jewry Lane and had spilled out on to the wider Fish Street. It was made up mainly of men and boys: by their dress Richard took them to be the shopkeepers, craftsmen, labourers and apprentices who practised their trades in the town. Some of them were throwing stones and rubbish at houses; others were pulling furniture and cloths from a building and adding it to a bonfire in the middle of the street. Everyone seemed to be possessed by a furious anger, and the vehemence and obscenity of their shouting shocked even Richard's battle-hardened sensibilities.

The regular, rhythmic noise made by his men as they marched down the street gradually overcame the voices of the crowd. One by one, and then in groups, the rioters stopped, turned, and saw Richard riding down on them astride his dark charger, his mail glittering in the morning sun, waving his sword, with a phalanx of soldiers at his back.

He let his steed run at full tilt into the crowd. With cries of alarm men shoved each other aside in their desperation to move from his path. The rioters crammed into Jewry Lane were still shouting angrily, unaware of Richard's arrival, but the crowd in Fish Street was dispersed into a milling throng of individuals.

Richard pulled up his destrier and stood in the stirrups.

'Go back to your shops!' he yelled at the rioters, and then he turned to direct his foot-soldiers. 'Make a line across the street' he called out. 'Two deep. Halberds forward. Move forward when I give the signal, and clear the street down towards St Aldate's. We'll deal with Jewry Lane when this is clear.'

He turned again to face the rioters, who had congregated around him to hurl abuse and shout their grievances, but who kept a safe distance from the hooves of his charger. 'This assembly is unlawful,' Richard yelled, hoping he was in the right. 'Go back to your shops and homes.'

One of the better-dressed and stouter of the men stepped forward. 'You're the chancellor's man,' he declared, 'and the chancellor has no business here. This is a matter for the mayor and burgesses. I am Reginald of Tay, bailiff, and in the mayor's name I demand that you leave.'

Richard smiled. He was enjoying this. 'This is my authority,' he said, holding up his sword. 'And my men will enforce it.' He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the line of soldiers, standing grimly across the width of the street with their pole-arms held horizontally before them. The transformation of the castle garrison from a drunken, brawling mob into at least the appearance of a disciplined force would, he was sure, impress the townspeople. 'My coat is stained with the blood of Welshmen,' he added, 'and a little bailiff's blood will hardly show.'

Reginald of Tay took several steps backwards. 'There's no need for violence, sir knight,' he stammered. 'But a murder has been done. The Jews did it.'

Richard assumed the bailiff was referring to the death of the Franciscan, Godwin. He couldn't understand why the townspeople were blaming the Jews – except that they seemed to blame the Jews for everything.

'And is this your idea of the correct procedure?' he asked, gesturing towards the crowd and the bonfire.

'You know what they're like,' the bailiff pleaded. 'Sly.

Secretive. Heathen. This is the only way to get the truth out of them.'

'This way leads only to injustice,' Richard replied. He pointed with his sword. 'You, bailiff, will stay with me, and you will tell the mayor what we find. The rest of you,' he added, raising his voice, 'go home, now, or my men will clear you from the street. As the chancellor's man I'll look into this business and if murder's been done I'll bring it before the chancellor's court and then, if necessary, the King's assizes.

Now go!'

He pulled on the reins and his destrier reared, its hooves flashing. Muttering curses, the men and boys slowly dispersed.

Richard made a sign to his soldiers to part their line to allow the people through. More men and boys were emerging from Jewry Lane as they realised that the crowd behind them had disappeared, and when they saw Richard, with the bailiff standing uncomfortably beside his left stirrup, and the halberd-wielding soldiers, they too made their escape.

At last the area was unnaturally silent. The streets were deserted, and there was no noise from within the shuttered houses. Richard dismounted, sheathed his sword, and posted his men as sentries at the mouth of Jewry Lane. He looked up at the stone-pocked, shit- and mud-spattered houses to the left and right of it on Fish Street. The largest of them showed signs of having previously been attacked and daubed with rubbish and obscenities. 'What's that house?' he asked the bailiff.

'That's their, what do you call it, their synagogue.'

Reginald of Tay spat on the ground.

'I suppose it's just like a church,' Richard said, although he had heard tales of the appalling rites and bloody sacrifices that went on in such places.

'The body's down there,' the bailiff said, pointing to the entrance of Jewry Lane. 'It's a terrible sight.'

'You've seen it?'

'Ah, well, no,' the bailiff admitted, 'but that's what I've heard.'

Richard strode into the alley. 'Come on, then. Let's have a look.'

The sunlight touching the rooftops only emphasised the gloom and squalor of Jewry Lane. The houses were substantial, but were divided up and built on. They were in a poor state of repair, and all their windows and shopfronts were shuttered. The street was narrow, and smelly, and choked with rubbish. If it had once been a prosperous thoroughfare, it had fallen on hard times. There was no sign of trade or craft.

'There!' the bailiff said.

Richard had already seen the legs protruding from a doorway. The rioters had thrown rubbish and stones at the neighbouring houses, but had avoided the one against whose door the body was propped. Richard thought it was possible that no one had touched the body since it had been left in the doorway.

The remains were those of a man. There were thin trails of blood running to the gutter in the centre of the street. The feet were shod in sandals, and the body was clothed in a grey robe.

A Franciscan friar.

Richard's first thought was that the body was Godwin's: How the friar had come to be in the Jewish quarter, two days after he had been found dead in the friary, was beyond his comprehension. Surely he would have been buried by now in the brothers' graveyard?

But the remains were not those of Godwin. Richard had never met brother Godwin but he realised, as he stared at the carcass, that he recognised this man. He had noted many times before that in death even the tallest of men seem to shrink and shrivel. The crumpled heap at his feet had once been Hubert, minister of the Franciscan house.

The bald crown of the tonsured head was battered and bloody. A placard was hanging on a string around the neck.

'What does that say?' Richard whispered. He could read two of the three words. 'Death? Jews?'

The bailiff shook his head. Plainly his learning was no better than Richard's. 'They killed him,' he said, in an unnaturally shrill voice. 'The Jews killed him.'

'It looks like it,' Richard said. 'But we can't be sure. I'll have to tell the chancellor. He'll know what to do.'

'I must tell the mayor,' the bailiff said, and backed away from the corpse.

Richard put one mailed hand on the man's shoulder and the other on the pommel of his sword. 'No. You'll stay with me. The chancellor must be told. And the grey friars. Then you can tell the mayor.'

Reginald of Tay opened his mouth to protest, but then his shoulders slumped. 'Very well,' he whispered.

'We must cover the holy man's remains,' Richard said. He found a torn sack in a heap of rubbish and draped it over the body. 'That will have to do.'

The bailiff allowed Richard to lead him back to Fish Street.

Richard organised his men. 'Osric, run back to the castle and bring Alfred and five more men. Tell Alfred his task is to keep a crowd from gathering. Wulfstan, there's a body down there. It looks like murder. I don't want anyone to go near it until I return. Send half your men to

the other end of the alley, and you remain at this end. Let no one pass in or out. And keep the Jews indoors. The bailiff and I are going to see the chancellor.'

When Oswald saw six soldiers issuing at a run from the castle's gate his first thought was that they were coming to arrest him. He would have run, but his legs felt as soft as curds and his feet were fixed to the cobblestones. He could only stand and watch, with his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, as they ran towards him, and past him, and on into the town.

The soldiers didn't want him. Their emergence from the castle was nothing to do with what he had done.

He found that his legs would move once again. He crossed the drawbridge, and managed to tell the guard there that the lady Matilda was expecting him. 'It's just something to do with gardening, that's all,' he said. He knew he was babbling, but he couldn't help himself. 'I'm a gardener myself, you see, at the friary, and that's why the lady Matilda asked for me.'

'On you go, then, holy brother,' the guard said with a sideways jerk of his head. 'Right on up to the keep, and then tell one of the women you're here to see her ladyship.'

Holy brother, Oswald repeated to himself as he climbed the winding path up the slopes of the bailey. If only he knew.

I'm no more holy than he is. In fact I'm certainly damned.

Despite his despairing thoughts, he couldn't help but be cheered by the symmetrical arrangement of trees, greensward and flowers. It had been many years since he had frequented castles, and this was unlike any he had seen or heard of. The very first garden, he thought, must have been something like this: a sheltered, enclosed ground in which Adam and Eve tended nature's plants, not wild and tangled as they grow in the fallen world, but ordered to reflect the symmetry of the divine will.

He stopped, more than once, to inspect an unfamiliar rose, or to survey the entire garden. He admired the straight paths, the low, curving hedges of sweet-smelling plants, and the cunningly situated benches and bowers. He exchanged greetings with one of the gardeners, and found himself immersed in a conversation about the propagation of pears.

It was only when he reached the foot of the keep that he remembered he was here to meet a lady. And why.

As the guard at the gate had told him, once inside the vast hollow of the ten-sided donjon he was accosted by one of the servants, who led him up the spiral stairs to the topmost storey.

He was surprised to be shown into the lady Matilda's chamber: it was hardly proper, and he could vouch for the fact that not all friars were as holy as they should be. The lady could have no way of knowing that she was in no danger from him.

There were two ladies in the room, sitting opposite each other in the window seats, reading books. Neither was old, as Oswald had expected the widowed Matilda to be. The younger of the two was small and pretty, with untamed curls of chestnut hair and a heart-shaped face with a sad expression.

The older was only a little taller, and a little plumper, and much more cheerful.

'Brother Oswald!' she cried, putting aside her book, and Oswald knew that this was the lady Matilda. 'Come in, brother. This is my guest, the lady Nyssa. Nyssa, Oswald is the Franciscans' expert on horticulture.'

Oswald bowed to each lady. Matilda was speaking in English, for which Oswald was profoundly grateful: it had been many years since he had thought or spoken in the courtly language. She had only the faintest French accent and that, and her name, made Oswald think she was of English stock.

'The castle has a most wonderful garden,' he said. 'I have often heard people talk about the work you have done here, and I had always hoped to be able to see it. The friary is so close, but I have had no chance to visit the castle until today.'

He knew he was once again talking too much, but the ladies did not seem displeased.

'We will go down to the bailey,' Matilda said, 'and there we will talk of nothing but trees and flowers. But I should warn you, brother friar, that my garden is a worldly place. Its goddess is the pagan Venus, and its theme is earthly love.'

She was teasing him, and he couldn't help blushing.

However, he was feeling more and more at ease in the ladies'

company. 'We friars live chastely,' he said, 'but we are not monks, my lady. We live in the world, and none of us has always been a friar. And I am sure that everything in your garden is part of God's creation.'

'Well said, brother Oswald. I can see that you and I will soon be friends.' Matilda took a step towards him, and for a moment he thought she was going to embrace him. But instead she continued to speak, in a quieter, graver tone. 'Before we descend from the keep, Oswald, there is another matter we must discuss. You know, of course, that my nephew, Guy de Marenne, is kin to Philip of Seaby, the chancellor of the university?'

Oswald nodded. It was as he had suspected. His summons to the castle was the chancellor's doing, and talking with the lady Matilda about her garden was merely a pretext to allow him to convey information to the chancellor. He felt relieved that he would at last be able to unburden himself, but also disappointed: he longed for a simple life in which he had no secrets to tell and no sins to confess. Despite the weight of the intelligence that he alone carried, and that he longed to unshoulder, he had begun to hope that the lady Matilda wanted no more than to share with him tales of the propagation of cuttings and the division of tubers.

He glanced at the lady Nyssa, and saw from her expression that she was puzzled by Matilda's conspiratorial diversion from the subject of the garden. Matilda had no hesitation, however, in speaking freely before the younger woman.

'You must tell your minister,' she said, 'that I have asked to see you again. Tell him, perhaps, that I have asked for certain seeds or plants. That will give you a good reason for coming here. Tomorrow morning will be convenient. I will make sure that Richard of Hockley, the chancellor's knight, is here to receive you. I regret that this morning he has been called away on urgent business.'

'Thank you, my lady,' Oswald said. 'I am very grateful. I have a heavy load of news to impart,' And, he thought, I will have to bear it until tomorrow. I had hoped to shed it today.

He noticed that the lady Nyssa had stepped back while he and Matilda were speaking. Her face was pale, and she looked distressed. 'My lady?' he said.

She smiled weakly. 'I'll wait for you in the garden,' she said, looking from Oswald to Matilda. 'I'm sorry, I can't take all this secrecy and plotting.' She ran from the room.

Oswald wished he could flee from secrecy and plotting as easily as the lady Nyssa.

'She's distracted, the poor thing,' Matilda said. She put her hand to her bosom. 'I know what ails her. She has an aching heart.' She smiled mischievously. 'And I know what will restore her, too. I will perform the cure in my garden of love.'

'The mayor should be here,' Reginald of Tay said for the third time. 'The mayor must be informed.'

The chancellor sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his substantial girth. 'No one is keeping you here, bailiff. But I suggest you stay until our business is concluded, so that you can present the mayor with our conclusions.'

'But isn't it obvious?' the bailiff cried. 'One of the Jews murdered him.' He shot a venomous glance towards the rabbi.

'The crime was committed in town, by one of the town's Jews.

It's the mayor's business, not yours.'

There was a silence. Alfric felt too shaken to think, still less to speak. Brother Hubert was dead. Murdered. It was incomprehensible. Who could harbour such a grudge against such a kind and just friar?

'If I may say so, you're jumping to conclusions.' It was the Doctor who broke the silence with a gentle rebuke to the bailiff.

'But it's obvious, I tell you,' the bailiff repeated, and threw his hands up in disgust.

'We'll deal with this in an orderly fashion,' the chancellor declared. 'First of all, you've all seen the body, where Richard found it, and again in my cellars?'

'Yes,' the bailiff said. The Doctor, Alfric, Richard and the rabbi nodded silently.

'Good,' the chancellor said. 'Brother Alfric, I'd be grateful if you would make arrangements to have it collected and taken back to the friary. It

might be wise to wait until after dark. We don't want to provoke another disturbance. Richard, how have you left the town?'

Alfric looked towards the knight, whom he had seen only briefly on the night Godwin's body had been found. He was a tall, straight-backed young man whose armour and livery bore the marks of soldiering. He appeared calm, and spoke clearly.

A good man to have about you in a crisis, Alfric judged.

'The Jewish quarter is quiet, chancellor,' Richard said.

'I've left only four men at the castle. All the rest are on the streets. I've told them to disperse any crowds that gather and to keep the Jews in their houses.'

'I protest,' the rabbi began, but the chancellor silenced him with an abrupt movement of his hand.

'Very good,' the chancellor said. He reached forward, but didn't touch the rough wooden placard on the table before him. 'The evidence is substantial,' he said.

'At first sight,' the Doctor added.

'You saw the minister's body,' the bailiff shouted. 'You saw the obscenities that had been done to it. How can there be any doubt?'

'There were four letters cut into the skin of brother Hubert's chest,' the Doctor said, in a matter-of-fact tone. 'J, H, W, H. The Roman letters for the consonants that in Hebrew spell out the Judaic name of God. That's right, isn't it, rabbi?'

He smiled at the Jew with a friendliness that surprised Alfric.

'But many Christians would also know the meaning of those letters.'

'But the, the other thing,' the bailiff spluttered.

'Ah, yes,' the Doctor said. 'The other thing. The fact that the prepuce of brother Hubert's penis has been cut off. Don't you find that rather strange? Circumcision is a holy Judaic rite, reserved for men coming of age within Judaism. If the murderer was a Jew who hated Christians, and who chose the minister of the Franciscans as a representative of Christianity, why would he honour his enemy with ritual circumcision? No, it seems to me that this act of butchery, like

the cutting of the letters, is designed to make everyone think that a Jew did the deed.'

'None of my people would do a thing like this,' the rabbi said.

His old, thin frame shook and his long grey beard trembled with emotion as he spoke. His English had no particular accent, but sounded slightly stilted. 'We are a civilised people.

We have little left now except our pride and our faith. These are difficult times for us, but we continue to obey the commandments.'

'And the notice, Doctor?' the chancellor said, nudging the placard with the tip of his finger.

'That's the most transparent ruse of them all,' the Doctor replied. 'If the murderer were a Jew he would surely write in Hebrew, or perhaps in English. This is written in Latin. And the hand is typically clerical, wouldn't you say, brother Alfric?'

Alfric stared at the three words, which he translated into English as 'death to the oppressors of the Jews'. Although the wooden strip was roughly hewn and unfinished, the script on it was clear and well formed. How could he not have noticed it?

'Yes,' he said, with a shrug. 'It's obvious when you look at it.

The writer of this was schooled in a monastery or, I suppose, a friary. Or was taught by a monk, or a friar, or a priest.'

'We school our own young men,' the rabbi put in.

'Brother Hubert died as a result of blows to the head,' the Doctor went on relentlessly. 'The cuts were done later.'

'How do you know that?' the chancellor asked belligerently.

'Not much blood,' Richard said. 'I'm sorry to interrupt, chancellor, but I've seen it on the battlefield. When the soldiers cut the dead. The blood hardly flows.'

'Precisely,' the Doctor said. 'And that means -'

'Hubert could have been killed anywhere,' Alfric blurted.

He put his hand to his forehead. 'He was probably struck first in his cell, while all the friars were in the refectory waiting for him.'

The Doctor laid a hand on his sleeve, and when Alfric turned he found the Doctor's intensely blue eyes staring at him. The Doctor's hand gripped his arm. Alfric understood, and lowered his head a fraction in acknowledgement of the Doctor's warning. They would have to be careful not to reveal their own investigations into brother Roger's activities. And, when they had a private moment, Alfric would have to tell the Doctor about his visit to the old observatory, and the disappearance of the papers he had found there.

'We found signs of a disturbance in the minister's cell,'

the Doctor said. 'He was late for supper last night, and Alfric went to look for him. No one saw brother Hubert again until his body was found this morning.'

'No one except the murderer,' the chancellor pointed out.

'If he was struck down in his cell, brother Alfric, then the culprit is certainly one of your friars. Do you still maintain that the death of brother Godwin was accidental, by the way?'

Alfric was beginning to feel the weight of the responsibility that rested with him now the minister was dead.

What would Hubert have said to such a question? 'That's how it appears, chancellor,' Alfric said. 'But be assured we are investigating the matter.' A thought occurred to him. 'At suppertime last night the gates of the friary were still open and unmanned,' he said. 'Anyone could have entered the precinct.

He could have moved through the friary unmolested, because all the friars were gathered in the refectory.'

'Isn't it just as likely, brother Alfric,' the chancellor said,

'that the murderer did the deed before the friars assembled for supper? I'm familiar with the minister's habits: if the door of his cell was closed, all those passing by would assume he was in his cell and did not wish to be disturbed.'

Alfric sighed. The chancellor was correct. He had to face the fact that one of the friars was probably a killer.

'So you're saying it wasn't the Jews at all?' the bailiff asked. He sounded confused.

‘That’s right,’ the Doctor said. ‘So sorry to disappoint you.’

‘When you think about it,’ the chancellor said, pushing his chair back from the table, ‘it never made any sense. Why would any of the Jews want to harm brother Hubert? The Franciscans hardly trouble themselves to convert the Hebrews.’

‘We’re happy to leave that task to our Dominican brothers,’ Alfric said. ‘Entirely happy.’

‘Every month,’ the rabbi said mournfully, ‘we lose a few of our people to the black friars, or to the Augustinian canons.

And some of our young women... ‘ He shook his head. ‘I can’t blame them. It’s hard to tell them to trust in their father above when all they have on earth is hunger and beatings.’

The chancellor snorted. ‘My concern is to keep the peace in this town,’ he said. ‘And therefore I’d be happy if this whole business, whether it’s one murder or two, is kept within the Franciscan friary. Therefore this is what I propose.

Reginald, go and tell the mayor that brother Hubert has been found dead in the town, and that as far we can tell the culprit was one of his own friars. You can assure him that the rumours that Hubert was killed by the Jews are unlikely to be true. I am sure that, under the circumstances, the mayor will be happy to leave the Franciscans to investigate their own affairs, and to bring charges to the appropriate court when they have found the perpetrator. In the meantime Richard, as constable of the castle and commander of the King’s garrison, will maintain order in the town.’

The chancellor stared at the bailiff, as if daring him to contradict his conclusions.

Reginald of Tay shrugged. ‘I’ll tell the mayor what you’ve said. But I can’t guarantee that he’ll agree.’ He looked around the room at Alfric, the Doctor, the rabbi and Richard and, when the silence began to lengthen uncomfortably, he turned on his heel and went out.

As the door closed behind the bailiff the chancellor breathed out heavily. ‘It will be difficult to keep this business quiet,’ he said. ‘Brother Alfric, I sincerely hope you can find our murderer quickly.’

Alfric was only too well aware that he still had no idea of who the culprit might be. Unlike the chancellor, he knew there were two

murders to be accounted for. And the loss of brother Hubert lay like a stone on his heart and weighed down his hopes. Still, he had to appear sure of himself.

‘As you can see, chancellor,’ he said, ‘the Doctor’s knowledge and wisdom are proving valuable. I am confident that with his help I will be able to discover the culprit and bring him to justice.’

‘I hope so,’ the chancellor grunted. ‘Richard, you’d better post your men in the town for the rest of the day. Put some of them in the university quarter. The scholars will use any excuse to cause ructions. Escort the rabbi back to his house.’

And now I suggest that all of you go about your business. I’m already late for a meeting of the bread and ale assize.’ He levered his bulky frame out of the chair.

The conference was over. ‘Thank you, chancellor,’ the rabbi said.

‘Thank the Doctor,’ the chancellor told him brusquely.

‘And Richard. Between them they’ve saved your people. For the time being. But you know I can’t and won’t protect you Hebrews forever.’

‘I know,’ the rabbi said quietly. ‘And yet still I thank you.’

We can only pray that these troubles will pass.’

‘Come along,’ Richard told the rabbi roughly, and hurried him from the room.

‘I understand,’ Alfric said to the Doctor as side by side they descended the wide stairway to the courtyard of the chancellor’s house, ‘that the chancellor’s young knight is in the service of Guy de Marenne.’

‘A big cheese, I take it?’ the Doctor said.

‘Cheese? The de Marenne estates are vast, I’m told. Guy has lands in England, Normandy and Gascony. He is a counsellor to the King. And so young Richard probably has a better idea than any of us what the King intends to do about the problem of the Jews.’

‘In what way are they a problem, may I ask?’

‘These are not my opinions, Doctor,’ Alfric said. He indicated that they should turn right along St John Street. ‘The Jews don’t belong here, people say. They were happy enough to tolerate the Jews when they

had money, of course.

Merchants, nobles, even the religious houses – they all went to the Jews when they needed money. But the King is a Christian warrior, and when he had to pay his armies he taxed the heathens in our midst. Now that the Jews have nothing, people are saying they have no right to live in a Christian country.'

'I see,' the Doctor said. 'How very depressing. And how very familiar. Some things never change. When the going gets rough, turn on the defenceless strangers.'

'It's in our nature, Doctor. There are some, such as Francis, who preach a better understanding. But sometimes it seems as though such voices are merely crying in the wilderness.'

'Even that is better than remaining silent,' the Doctor said.

'Well, we've done what we can for the rabbi today. We have our own problems to solve. Two murders, now.' He rubbed his hands together, and it occurred to Alfric that the Doctor found some sort of pleasure in the unravelling of tangled mysteries.

'Brother Oswald could have killed brother Godwin,' Alfric said. 'Perhaps in a drunken brawl. But I can see no reason why he would go to Hubert's cell and strike him on the head. It's possible there are two killers for us to find.'

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed reluctantly. 'But it would be so much more satisfying if we could prove that the two deaths are connected.'

'You have a theory, don't you, Doctor?'

'I have some ideas. Some suspicions. I think we have to interview all the friars. We know they were all present at supper. But how many of them can give no account of what they were doing before the bell summoned them to the refectory?'

Matilda and the nervous, chatty friar were somewhere in the garden. Nyssa, nestled in the depths of her favourite overgrown bower, could hear their voices as they wandered about it. They were discussing matters horticultural, and Nyssa reflected that gardening was a social leveller: there was as little deference in Oswald's voice as there was haughtiness in Matilda's. In fact they sounded like two peasants walking through their fields as they swapped tales of compost and blight and seedlings.

The voices receded as Matilda and Oswald ambled to a more remote part of the bailey, and Nyssa was left alone with the rose scent and the bird song and her view of the flowers and painted towers.

It had been silly of her, she realised, to become upset in Matilda's room. Since she had entered this fortified haven she seemed to have become even more sensitive to anything that threatened to disturb her peace. Matilda had shown her such kindness and generosity, and although the noble lady seemed to expect nothing from her in return for her hospitality, Nyssa couldn't help feeling a little guilty. The least she could do, she thought, was retain her composure when confronted with the realisation that the gardening friar was also a spy for the chancellor of the university.

But it was more and more difficult to think of anything outside the castle walls. There was a bustling town beyond the ramparts: one of the largest in the kingdom, with merchants, and a market, and a university, and churches. None of it seemed real any more.

The Doctor was out there somewhere, no doubt doing Doctor-like things. I suppose, Nyssa thought, he's looking into that dreadful business of the friar who died. Brother Oswald must have known him. She shivered: she didn't like to think that even the palest shadow of tragedy could reach within the castle walls.

Nyssa wondered briefly why the Doctor had not come to visit her. This was, after all, her second day at the castle. But she remembered how involved he became in the affairs of the people he visited. She smiled to herself. I must have learnt that behaviour from him, she thought. And if I'm to unlearn it, and have any rest, it's perhaps as well that he's leaving me alone.

But perhaps I ought to find out if he's all right. This earlier Doctor doesn't know me, of course. He doesn't know yet that I've accompanied him into adventures, the most horrifying bits of which I've spent years trying to forget. He probably thinks I'll collapse with nerves at the first sight of blood. He doesn't know I've killed Cybermen. Or that I was the last nurse to leave the field hospital on Brallis, cutting open the pustules as they appeared on the men's limbs, feeling the leech grubs writhing and growing under the skin of my legs as I worked.

She closed her eyes and tried to control the trembling of her body. And I'm never going to do those things again, she promised to herself. I'll stay here, where it's safe, Her breathing was steady again. She

opened her eyes and saw the reassuring sunlit garden.

I can't face going back into the town, she told herself. It's too noisy and raucous and crowded and dirty. I'll stay here, and if the Doctor wants me he'll have to come and find me.

Matilda and Oswald, walking along the base of the bailey wall near the gatehouse, came into view. They were still talking animatedly, but were now too far away for Nyssa to overhear them. A large, dark horse trotted through the gateway, and its rider dismounted. He had a tall figure, and appeared to be clothed in metal. For a second Nyssa was reminded of the Cyberman she had killed, and she winced at the memory.

But the rider was Richard of Hockley, of course. Nyssa recognised the knight almost immediately. She saw that his movements, so confident and definite as he jumped from his horse and gave instructions to the sentry at the gate, became stiff and hesitant as he approached Matilda and the friar. He bowed to Matilda, and nodded his head to brother Oswald.

The three of them conversed.

Nyssa sighed. No doubt they were discussing the arrangements for the friar to betray his order's secrets to the chancellor's man. It seemed almost blasphemous to conspire in this sunny, peaceful refuge.

Richard turned to leave, but Matilda laid a hand on his arm, leant towards him, and spoke privately into his ear. He listened, his head lowered towards hers, and then straightened slowly. His gaze swept across the bailey, and stopped when he saw Nyssa sitting in her bower. She tried to shrink into the flowery depths. Matilda spoke again to Richard, and with long strides he set off in a straight line towards Nyssa.

I shall have to be polite to him, Nyssa said to herself.

Perhaps he has news from the Doctor. I'll listen to what he has to say, and then dismiss him. He's only a knight, and I am a lady. And he's not a bad or ill-meaning fellow. He's just a bit rough-edged and abrupt. Come on, Nyssa, you can deal with him. You've dealt with soldiers before. I just wish I didn't make him so nervous.

She put a smile on her face to greet him as he came to a halt in front of her.

‘The lady Matilda would have me bid you good day, my lady,’ he said. He had obviously rehearsed this little courtly speech while walking across the garden, but it was clear from his expression that as he recited it he realised that it sounded grudging. ‘And I wish to do so, myself, of course, but I didn’t want to trouble you...’

His mailed fist was rigid on the pommel of his sword.

When he realised that Nyssa was looking at it, he flung his hands behind his back.

‘I’m desolated to appear before you in the garb of Mars,’

he said, looking down at his stained surcoat. Under his breath, in English, Nyssa heard him curse his faltering French.

She took pity on him. ‘Be at your ease, sir knight,’ she said. ‘And speak freely in your native tongue. I’ve been told that you’ve taken almost the entire garrison into the town.’

Perhaps, she thought, he’ll relax if I can get him to talk about his military duties.

‘There was a bit of trouble in the Jewish quarter,’ he said, speaking without hesitation now. ‘We sorted it out. The men are still in town. I should get back to them.’ He looked over his shoulder towards the gatehouse, but made no move to leave. He seemed tongue-tied again.

‘Have you seen the Doctor?’ Nyssa asked.

‘Oh, yes, my lady,’ Richard said. ‘Forgive me for not thinking of telling you. I was prepared to tell you all the news, but when I see you I become confused. I’m sorry.’

His face was red, and he looked down at the pointed toes of his mail chausses.

‘The Doctor?’ Nyssa prompted him.

‘Yes, my lady. I’ve just left him at the chancellor’s house.

He is well, and he is still lodging with the grey friars. He and brother Alfrie have much to do.’

He was trying to conceal something from her. She could tell. ‘Is there more that you wish to tell me, Richard?’

He stared at her with an anguished expression. 'More than.

I dare say, my lady,' he said. His eyes were wide and beseeching. 'I thank the stars that brought you here, my lady Nyssa, and that brought me here to be your knight protector. I want only to serve you, lady; with a strong arm and a loving heart.'

What was he saying? Nyssa turned her head away. She couldn't look at him. 'Is there danger?' she said, and realised that her surprise at his speech had made her voice sound weak.

Richard stepped forward and fell to his knees in front of her. 'I will not let the bloody murderer come within sight of you, my lady. I vow that he will not touch a single one of your glowing hairs. I will guard the temple of your soft, warm body.'

Nyssa could not move any further away from him: rose thorns pressed into her back as she curled herself into the corner of the seat. She glanced wildly around, but the garden was deserted. Matilda and the friar had gone. There was not even a gardener in sight.

'Stop!' she cried. 'Shut up! Leave me alone.'

Richard gasped and jumped to his feet. 'I'm sorry!' he said, his voice almost as shrill as Nyssa's. He leant forward to reassure her and then leapt back and put his metal-clad hands to his head when he saw her recoil from him. 'My lady, I'm sorry. I had no wish to offend you. I'm a stupid, clumsy knight. I want only to make sure that you're safe.'

'Murderer?' Nyssa said. 'You said there was a murderer.'

In the town? Is this how you look after me? By telling me there's a killer on the loose?'

Richard appeared lost for words. He held his head in his hands and rocked from side to side. Then he drew a knife from a sheath at his waist.

Nyssa saw the blade glittering in the sunlight as Richard brought it towards her. For a moment she thought he was going to strike her with it, and she opened her mouth to cry out.

'No, no, my lady,' Richard begged. 'Don't be afraid. Take my knife. I can't always be at your side. Carry my knife with you, to protect yourself. It will make you feel safe.'

Nyssa stared at the blade. She saw the honed edge, the notches, the ingrained dark stains near the handle, where Richard was holding it in his big, mailed fist. It was a knife that had seen much use. She imagined it being thrust and parried in the heat of a battle. She saw it slicing through flesh, being covered with gushing blood, hooking out entrails.

‘Take it away,’ she managed to say. ‘I won’t touch it. Go away, Richard, I beg you. Leave me.’

Richard continued to hold the knife towards her. ‘You must take it, my lady. It will protect when I cannot.’ At last he lowered it, but then Nyssa started and almost whimpered with fear as he leant over her. She could smell beer on his breath and sweat on his body. ‘I’ll go, my lady, but I will not leave you defenceless. The knife is here, do you see? I’ll place it under the cushions. Take it up when I’ve gone, and keep it with you. I only want to say -’

He broke off, and stared at her. He seemed to be on the verge of tears. He turned, and strode towards the gatehouse.

He called for his charger.

When he had gone, Nyssa sat in the bower for a long time, until she had stopped shaking. She knew she was overreacting, but she was unable to control the revulsion she felt. It wasn’t Richard: he was big and clumsy, but she knew he meant her no harm. But the sight of the knife, so close to her face, had unnerved her. And she was angry. How could he be so stupid?

This was her haven, her refuge: how dare he march into it with his armour and his sword and his bloodstained coat and his big fists and his glittering knife and his talk of murderers?

She stood up. She set off towards the keep. She would calm herself by reading. She left the knife where Richard had put it.

Perhaps the old man was losing his mind. Thomas had seen it happen to some of the most aged of the friars. Brother Lawrence could hardly remember his own name, and had to be fed with a spoon. It was disgusting to watch. If brother Roger was going the same way, there was no hope that his work would ever be finished. Thomas stared at Roger sitting on his bed with a vacant smile on his face, and felt a tide of panic rising in his guts.

‘Don’t you understand, you old fool?’ he said between gritted teeth.

‘The Elixir manuscript has gone. Everything we’ve written in the last three years. The results of all that work. It’s disappeared.’

He clapped his hands to his head. Sometimes he thought he was going mad himself. It was enough to drive anyone to distraction. Two people, cooped up together in such a confined space. Never apart. Hardly a moment of rest. Constantly chafing and fretting.

‘Listen, brother Roger,’ he pleaded, ‘you must see how grave a state we are in. It’s not merely a question of starting again, from the beginning. Someone must have taken the papers from the observatory. Therefore someone knows you have been there, working, in defiance of the minister’s injunction. Our secret has been discovered. Do you understand?’

Roger Bacon nodded. ‘I know that it has been pleasant, these last few nights, to sleep and pray instead of work and write.’

Thomas could have screamed with rage. The buzzing pain that pulsed always in his head now throbbed like a drum. ‘But if we can do no more work in the observatory,’ he said, ‘and if the papers are lost, you must remember what you have done.’

Can you remember, brother Roger? The recipes? The ingredients? Can you remember?’

Roger edged away from Thomas and stared at him. ‘The recipes don’t work, brother,’ he reminded him.

‘But we’re close!’ Thomas clutched the front of the old man’s habit and shook it. ‘We’re almost there. You said you needed only a few more weeks.’

‘I’ve told you that many times before, Thomas. Each time I think I’m closing on my prey, it darts away like a fish that’s seen a pike. There are secrets that lie beyond the mortal sphere, and it seems the recipe for the Elixir is one of them.’

It seemed to Thomas that he had spent a lifetime wheedling and cajoling brother Roger to concentrate on his work. The words had become so familiar that he hardly needed to think. ‘You are the wisest man in Christendom, brother. Your name is known from Lisbon to Rome, and across the lands of the Saracens. The Elixir of Life, brother Roger. Who but *Doctor Mirabilis* could unlock its secrets?

They whisper, in Paris and in Padua, that the flame of your wisdom is

dead. The Elixir will prove them wrong. You can confound your enemies, brother, if you will but work to produce the Elixir.'

Roger waved a limp hand in the air. 'I am a friar, Thomas, not a warrior. I am old and tired.'

Thomas shook his head violently. The voices in there were becoming more and more insistent. Once again he grasped the old man's cloak, and pulled his face to within an inch of his own. 'You've tried that old story too many times,' he snarled.

'You're no more frail than I am. You'll remember, damn you, and you'll work, and you'll create the Elixir, or I'll -'

There was a noise. A knocking. Was it the throbbing in his head? No: it was coming from the door. Someone was knocking on the door of the cell.

Thomas forced himself to remain calm. He pressed his fingernails into the palms of his hand and took deep breaths.

There was no need to expect the worst. Perhaps it was a friar with news about the missing minister, or one sent to inquire after brother Roger's health. Surely, with Hubert's disappearance to worry about, the interfering proctor Alfric wouldn't come now to discipline Roger for using the old observatory? Surely there would be a few more days in which to continue the work?

'Come in,' he called.

He heard the door open. He composed his expression and turned slowly. He managed to remain calm when he saw brother Alfric stooping through the doorway, followed by the Doctor.

'Good afternoon, brother,' he said. 'And to you, Doctor. Is something amiss? You look grim-faced.'

'Is it too much to expect the two of you to attend prayers in the church?' Brother Alfric's voice was harsh. 'You've missed terce, sext and nones today, and I can't remember the last time either of you came to every service during a single day.'

'I'm sorry, brother,' Thomas said. What was this? Alfric was trying to disconcert him with an aggressive question.

Keep calm. Be gentle and reasonable. 'Brother Roger's health is poor,

as you know; and I don't like to leave him alone. We pray here, together, at the appointed hours.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Alfric said. 'As you've been closeted in here you won't have heard the news. Brother Hubert has been found dead.'

Thomas was aware that both Alfric and the Doctor were watching him. How did they expect him to react? It was good news: anything that kept Alfric busy could allow more time for Roger and Thomas to continue with the work. But he knew he had to appear shocked. He glanced at brother Roger: the old man was sitting forward, his eyes glittering with interest.

'The minister? Dead?' Keep it short, Thomas told himself.

Don't babble. His head was pounding.

'He was found this morning,' the Doctor said. 'In the Jewish quarter.'

'He was killed by the Hebrews?' Thomas cursed himself.

He shouldn't have leapt to that conclusion. 'Or was he taken ill? What was he doing there?'

Alfric ignored Thomas's questions. He held up a slate on which he had written a list. 'I am asking each of the brothers to tell me where he was from yesterday afternoon until this morning.'

'By what right?' It was brother Roger's querulous voice.

'Who are you, brother Alfric, to question us?'

'I am the proctor of this house,' Alfric said mildly, 'and, although I have the support of the chancellor of the university and the constable of the castle, I ask merely as your brother.'

Do you refuse to answer the question?'

'Certainly,' brother Roger said firmly. 'I answer only to the minister, and to God. Now leave us.'

'I will answer for both of us,' Thomas said. He was delighted that Roger's intransigence would make him appear co-operative. 'Brother Roger and I have been together since I took him to lecture in the Italian school yesterday afternoon.'

We went together to supper in the refectory, and we returned here

together. We have been in each other's company all the time since then. That's so, isn't it, brother Roger?'

The old man scowled. 'I suppose so.'

Alfric and the Doctor exchanged a glance. Alfric chalked a note on his slate.

'Apart from at supper,' brother Alfric said, 'have either of you seen brother Oswald since yesterday afternoon? We can't find him in the friary, and no one has seen him.'

Oswald! Thomas's mind raced. Of course! From his vantage point on the roof he had often seen Oswald making his furtive trips to the chancellor's house. Could it be that the minister and the proctor had remained ignorant of the chancellor's informants in their house? It must be so. With Godwin dead, Oswald would be desperate for the chancellor's protection.

'No, brother,' Thomas said. 'I've not seen brother Oswald for days.' But I will be sure to see him soon, he thought.

'Thank you both, brothers,' Alfric said. 'That's all for now. I'll make an announcement about brother Hubert at vespers. Perhaps you could stir yourselves to attend.' He looked from Thomas to Roger, and his expression revealed his scepticism about the old man's frailty.

'We'll do our best to come to church,' Thomas assured him.

Alfric said nothing, turned, and ducked through the doorway. The Doctor followed him and, just as Thomas began to relax, stuck his head through the doorway again before Thomas could close the door.

'One last thing,' the Doctor said. 'After the lecture I walked back here with brother Roger. Did you bring the donkey cart back to the friary?'

Thomas could have laughed in his face. He had been expecting the question. 'I'm glad you asked me, Doctor,' he said. 'At the end of the lecture, when I went to collect the cart, I found that it and the donkey had gone. I spent a little time searching for it, and found the donkey wandering in the parish of St Peter-in-the-East. But there was no sign of the cart. I'd be grateful if you'd inform the proctor.'

'That's what I thought must have happened,' the Doctor said. 'And don't worry, I'll certainly tell brother Alfric. He'll be most interested.'

The bells were ringing for vespers. Oswald picked up the skirts of his habit and began to run. The soles of his sandals slapped loudly on the cobblestones and then the sound was muffled as he raced along the dry, packed earth of Friars Street. He was almost at the friary gatehouse. He would be in time for the evening prayers, at least. He had already missed three services.

He had been at the castle all day. He had hardly noticed the time passing. The lady Matilda had an insatiable appetite for the minute details of his work in the friary gardens, and he had been equally fascinated by her conversation about her transformation of the castle's bailey. He had almost forgotten he was in a holy brotherhood. He had forgotten his guilt about Godwin, and his anxiety about the secrets he knew, and his urgent need to pass everything to the chancellor's knight.

Now, as he ran towards the friary, all his troubles returned to haunt him.

And there, outside the gatehouse, was brother Alfric, and with him the Doctor.

They were waiting for him. That was obvious. When brother Alfric saw him, he touched the Doctor's arm and pointed along the street towards him.

Oswald slowed to a walk. He couldn't avoid brother Alfric and the Doctor. Nothing would look more suspicious than to turn and walk away. He had to face them. He would look guilty, he knew it. They couldn't fail to see it in his face. He hadn't perspired while running, but now he could feel cold beads of sweat starting from his forehead. They would be able to smell his fear.

'Brother Oswald,' the proctor said. 'I've been looking for you.'

'I've been at the castle,' Oswald said. He tried to slow his words. 'I have been attending the lady Matilda all day. She will vouch for that, I'm sure. I met the lady Nyssa, too. And many of the servants and gardeners saw me.' He hadn't mentioned that he had also met the chancellor's knight, the constable of the castle. He didn't want to make any connection between himself and the chancellor. But what if brother Alfric had already spoken to Richard of Hockley? How could he know what best to say?

'And how is Nyssa?' the Doctor asked, with a wide smile.

‘It feels like ages since I last saw her.’

‘The lady is well, Doctor, I think,’ Oswald replied. He was astonished. This was the last subject on which he had expected to be questioned, and he had had no idea that the Doctor knew the lady Nyssa. Were they kin? Oswald was mystified. ‘I spoke to her for only a few moments.’

The Doctor appeared to be satisfied. He turned to Alfric, who was reading from a list of names on a slate.

‘You’re the last one, brother,’ Alfric said. ‘I’ve asked all the other friars. Would you tell us where you were, between vespers yesterday and prime today?’

They knew. That was Oswald’s first thought. Somehow they had discovered what he had done. He felt his heart beating in his chest, and tears prickling in the corners of his eyes.

‘Vespers?’ he said. ‘Yesterday?’ He tried to remember. He had to stay close to the truth. Perhaps they were trying to trick him into a confession. Perhaps, after all, they didn’t know what he had done. ‘I wasn’t in church for vespers,’ he said. ‘I felt unwell. I prayed in my cell.’

‘One sickly friar who can lecture more energetically than a teacher half his age,’ Alfric commented to the Doctor, ‘and another sickly one whom we find running along the street. The friary seems plagued by these fleeting disorders.’ He sighed.

‘And after vespers?’

‘I remained in my cell, brother,’ Oswald said, ‘until I heard the bell for supper.’ It wasn’t a good story. How much more impressive if he were able to say he had gone out into the town to preach, or to care for the poor. But it would be a mistake to make claims he could not prove. Better to stick close to the truth.

‘And after supper?’

‘I returned to my cell.’

‘I see,’ brother Alfric said. He made a mark on the slate.

‘And when did you last see brother Godwin?’

Oswald prayed for the ground to open and swallow him.

His legs felt as weak as a newborn calf's. 'I saw him at midnight prayers, brother. On the night that he – before he disappeared.'

The Doctor leant forward and stared at his face. 'Nasty bruises,' he said. 'Healing up now, though. I expect you walked into a door, or fell down a flight of stairs.'

'Yes,' Oswald said. 'Yes, that's it.'

'I thought so,' the Doctor said. 'And did anyone see you, after midnight?'

'You weren't in church for matins or prime,' brother Alfric added.

'No, that's true,' Oswald said. They suspected him of killing Godwin. It was obvious. 'That was the night I, I injured myself,' he said, touching his fingers to his face. 'I stayed in my cell. I saw no one.'

I saw no one who is now alive, he thought. But they must know I was with Godwin. I was only trying to stop him drinking. I was always so scared that when he was drunk he would talk about our secrets.

Oswald remembered the scene in the wine cellar. The torchlight flickering on the walls. Godwin, who had once had such a manly frame, had become as fat as an alewife during the past few years. His bulk swaying between the rows of barrels as he drank. Singing at the top of his voice, and then protesting when Oswald tried to quieten him and lead him away. Arguing, scuffling, both saying cruel things they would regret in the morning. But morning didn't come for Godwin.

Oswald was overwhelmed by his guilt. He could confess that he had killed Godwin. There would be a kind of justice in it.

'That's all, brother,' the proctor said. 'For now. Come to church for vespers. I have an announcement to make about brother Hubert.'

At last the summer sun had tired of baking the roofs of Oxford and had slid reluctantly below the horizon, leaving trails of vermilion across the darkening sky.

Alfric turned from the window. It had been a long and weary day.

'Well, Doctor,' he said. 'I should retire to my cell to pray.'

But much as I need guidance, I fear I shall fall asleep. Will you walk with me to the dorter?’

‘With pleasure,’ the Doctor replied.

His vitality seemed undimmed, despite the lateness of the day. Alfric wondered, once again, as he closed the door of the scriptorium behind him, whether it was wise to trust the Doctor with everything he knew. And once again he concluded that, without the gleam of the Doctor’s wisdom to illuminate the dark corners of the mystery, there was little chance that he would ever discover who killed Godwin and Hubert.

‘I confess, Doctor,’ he said, as they set off side by side along the corridor towards the friars’ sleeping-quarters, ‘that I’m no nearer to a solution.’

‘You realise, of course,’ the Doctor said cheerfully, ‘that you’re still a suspect?’

‘Me?’ Alfric asked.

‘Well, I admit I can’t think why you should have wanted to murder brother Godwin,’ the Doctor said. ‘But you had a clear motive for killing Hubert: he stood in the way of you becoming minister here.’

‘Doctor, that’s absurd. It is not certain that I will be made minister. It’s not even likely, as I’m not the most learned of our brotherhood. It’s a matter for the minister-general of the order.’

‘You could have committed the crime at almost any time yesterday afternoon, of course,’ the Doctor went on relentlessly. ‘Everyone thought Hubert was in his cell, but only because the door was closed.’

They climbed in silence the stairs at the entrance to the visitors’ dormitory. ‘So I had both motive and opportunity,’

Alfric commented as they reached the landing. ‘But who, then, ransacked Hubert’s cell? And why?’

‘You could have done it yourself,’ the Doctor declared triumphantly. ‘To put me off the scent.’

Alfric pushed open the door of his cell and stared into the room. ‘And no doubt I did the same in my own cell, Doctor, for the same reason.’

Alfric’s cell had been thoroughly searched. The bed had been pulled

apart, and the table was overturned. His correspondence and books of accounts had been taken from their chest and strewn across the floor.

‘Well, well,’ the Doctor said. ‘What would anyone be looking for here, I wonder?’

Alfric sighed. ‘Come in, Doctor. I can see there’ll be no rest for me yet.’ He righted the table and cleared a space on the floor. ‘Be seated, please, Doctor, if you can find room. I’ll tell you where I went yesterday, while you were at brother Roger’s lecture. And I’ll tell you what I found there.’

The Doctor listened intently as Alfric described in detail his visit to the old observatory. He told the Doctor what he knew about Roger Bacon’s work and teaching before he joined the Franciscans, and the stories about the observatory.

He described the building, and everything he had seen in it.

‘As I’ve said, Doctor, nearly all the papers and books and devices were covered in dust, and appeared to have lain undisturbed for years. They show that brother Roger continued to work on his unholy theories after he joined our order, but they revealed equally that he stopped some years ago. Then I found what I was looking for.’

‘You found recent work,’ the Doctor surmised. ‘And that’s of interest to you because...’

‘You’ve seen brother Roger in the schoolroom, Doctor.

Almost everything he says is controversial. We Franciscans are in a delicate position. I don’t understand all of the politics.

It’s years since I last went to Rome. We are required to live in the world, and to preach, and therefore we are allowed some laxity. If we could be sure that brother Roger would confine himself to lectures full of errors and letters attacking other teachers, then we could encompass him and his ways. But certain things are absolutely forbidden: the private ownership of possessions, including books; the writing of books; and the teaching of the heresy that we are living in the last days, and that judgement is imminent. The Franciscans have rivals, Doctor, and if they were to find out that the most distinguished teacher of all the grey friars has disobeyed the specific instructions of the minister-general, then the future of the entire order might be in doubt.’

‘I see,’ the Doctor said. ‘So if Roger Bacon has been defying those orders it’s important for you to find the evidence before anyone else does. And that, I presume, is precisely what you found?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’ Alfric recounted everything he could remember about ‘the manuscript he had taken from the observatory. He noted the Doctor’s quick indrawing of breath when he named the papers as the Elixir of Life. He told the Doctor he had presented the papers to the minister in the scriptorium.

‘I wish you’d told me all this earlier,’ the Doctor grumbled. ‘It puts Hubert’s murder in a completely new light.’

‘I know,’ Alfric said, ‘and I apologise. I have tried to find an opportunity, but in this place it’s difficult to be sure of privacy. I think it’s likely someone found out that I took the manuscript from the observatory and that I gave it to brother Hubert. That person must, I suppose, have gone to Hubert’s cell to look for the papers, and must have been so desperate to have them that he killed Hubert for them.’

‘But he didn’t find them, did he?’ the Doctor said. He spread his arms to indicate the chaos in Alfric’s cell. ‘He’s still looking.’

‘When I left brother Hubert he had the papers, and he told me he was going to his cell,’ Alfric insisted. ‘I saw him later, in various parts of the friary, but he no longer had the bundle with him. The papers must have been in his cell.’

‘But if the papers were in Hubert’s cell, and the murderer found them, why has your room been so thoroughly turned over?’

‘We don’t know,’ Alfric concluded. ‘There are still too many things we don’t know.’

‘You’re safe now, at least,’ the Doctor pointed out.

‘Safe? Oh. I see what you mean.’

‘The murderer, if that’s who it is, failed to find the manuscript in here. He’s unlikely to look again.’

For a few moments both men sat deep in thought.

‘I can’t believe that brother Roger would kill to regain his writings,’ Alfric declared. ‘He’s a belligerent old devil, but he’s not a murderer.’

'I agree,' the Doctor said. 'But he has the best of motives: if that manuscript had stayed in Hubert's possession, or yours, then brother Roger could have found himself spending the rest of his life in prison. And Roger Bacon is a proud man with an independent spirit.'

'Of course,' Alfric said. 'The fact that my cell has been searched suggests that the murderer is not necessarily the man who's looking for the manuscript. Hubert could have been killed some time before the manuscript was taken from his cell.'

'Or some time afterwards,' the Doctor said. 'But either way, I agree it could be that brother Roger is the person who has ransacked two rooms in his search for his manuscript, and that someone else is the killer.'

'Tomorrow,' Alfric said, 'we must have another talk with brother Roger.'

'Indeed we must,' the Doctor agreed. 'But first, I'd like to see the old observatory.'

'Of course, Doctor,' Alfric said. A thought struck him. 'If the murderer and the seeker of the manuscript are one and the same person,' he said, 'then whoever has the Elixir manuscript is in danger. And quite possibly doesn't even know it.'

How long since the bell had sounded for matins? An hour, perhaps two. Oswald sat on his bed with his arms wrapped around his knees. Although the night was warm, and he was still dressed in his woollen habit, he shivered occasionally.

He looked up at the window. He had left the shutters open.

At last it was no longer a black rectangle. Now there was the slightest grey hint of dawn.

The box was on the floor beside him. Everything was ready. Arranged across the top were the little clay pots of seedlings that would be his pretext for another visit to the castle. He would leave the friary as soon as it was light. The chancellor's knight would be at the castle, and Oswald would be able to unload at least one of his guilty secrets.

Brother Alfric and the Doctor had not come to visit him again. They were unlikely to come now, in the darkest hours, just before dawn. Nonetheless he kept his eyes fixed on the door, and on the barricade he had constructed against it.

He had pushed the chest up to the door, and the table, and the chair. Each piece of furniture was made of solid oak, and he had not been able to lift even the chair but had had to drag it into position. He had sweated with the effort of constructing the barricade, and when he had finished his limbs had been shaking. It had been a ridiculous thing to do, but he knew he couldn't bear to be questioned again.

Now he would have to drag everything away from the door, so that he could leave.

He started. Had he heard a sound? Someone in the corridor, outside his cell?

No. Or if there had been someone, he had passed by.

And then the door moved, and struck the barricade of furniture.

Oswald leapt from the bed and leant against the table, adding his scant weight to the barrier. 'Who's there?' he said.

His voice was a hoarse whisper.

There was no reply. There was a thud against the door, and Oswald felt the table shake.

Someone was trying to enter his cell. Someone with the strength of an ox. Oswald muttered desperate prayers as he pushed with all the force he could muster against the table.

The door opened an inch, and Oswald forced it shut again.

Footsteps, running, and then the door shook as something heavy struck it. Oswald cried out, and begged for strength in his limbs, and shoved the door closed.

The battle went on for what seemed like hours. Sometimes the attacker kept up the pressure, charging again and again at the door. Sometimes he pretended to leave, in the hope that Oswald would let down his guard.

But Oswald remained in position, pushing as hard as he could against the furniture, his muscles shaking with the exertion, and he was still there when the bells began to sound for prime.

He slumped to the floor and began to weep. Dimly he could hear the sounds of footsteps, and doors opening and closing, as his brothers

stumbled from their beds and made their way towards the church. Through his window he could see blue sky, and little clouds glowing golden in the rays of the rising sun.

The friary was awake, and Oswald was safe – from nocturnal visitors, at least, if not from the misgivings of his soul.

He would go to church. He wanted to pray, to give thanks and to receive solace. He would wash, and shave, and eat a little breakfast. And everywhere he went he would carry the box containing the seedlings, until it was a reasonable time to take it to the castle. Today would be the day of his deliverance.

Chapter Six

There could be no doubt about it: brother Roger was the cleverest man alive. Whenever Thomas wondered whether his irascible master's reputation had been built on nothing more than theories and speculation, he had only to pick up one of the old man's wonderful devices and he was reassured.

This morning he had brought with him to his rooftop perch the extendable tube of metal that had attracted the Doctor's attention the first time he had come to brother Roger's cell.

When Thomas held the tube to his eye the cunningly polished lenses of glass within the tube made distant objects larger in his sight.

He pointed the tube at the most distant thing he could clearly see: Holywell mill, on the River Cherwell, beyond the northern wall of the town. It was said that the waters had miraculous properties. But brother Roger's tube was a truer miracle: as Thomas adjusted its length and closed his other eye, the mill building appeared before him as if it were no more distant than the tower of St Aldate's. He could see the wheel turning in the stream, and the froth of the foam it made.

But his concerns were closer than Holywell. He took the tube from his eye and scanned the nearby streets. The day was the feast of St Giles, and only the bakers were at work in the town. Beyond the walls, the fields were empty of serfs and villeins. Thomas knew that by noon, however, the streets of Oxford would be as crowded as on a working day. The merchants would walk to church in their best attire, then the peasants would come in from the surrounding villages to drink beer and dance, and later still there would be games of bowls and football, and archery contests made deadly dangerous by the intoxication of the competitors. Now, though, the town was strangely quiet.

And yet there were people moving through the lanes and alleys. And here was one such, emerging from beneath Thomas's eyrie. It was a friar, leaving the gatehouse and hurrying westwards along Friars Street.

Thomas hardly needed to use the tube, but he put it to his eye.

As he had thought, the friar was brother Oswald. He was carrying a large box and, thanks to the powers of the tube, Thomas could see the leaves of the tiny plants lined up across the top of the box. Why was he heading westwards? Thomas would have expected him to turn east at the friary gate, and to proceed along Pennyfarthing Street towards the university quarter.

He watched Oswald's progress. When the friar reached the cobbled yard in front of the castle's barbican, would he enter the castle or would he continue to the town's West Gate, and out on to the Faringdon road?

Oswald scurried under the ramparts of the barbican.

Thomas pondered for a moment, and then pointed the tube towards the centre of town. He cursed: no matter how carefully he aimed the device, when he put his eye to its end it seemed always to be directed at some place other than the one he wanted to see. He found Carfax, and from there he slowly lowered the tube, down Fish Street, and to the crowded rooftops of the Jewish quarter. There, thicker than the wisps from the domestic chimneys all across the town, a column of black smoke rose into the blue sky. A house had been fired during the night. That, Thomas thought, might convince the proctor that the townspeople, at least, still believed the Jews were responsible for the death of brother Hubert.

These days it was unusual to see a Jew outside the cramped alleys of the Jewish quarter. How long would it be, Thomas wondered, before they were all driven from the town?

It was said that some of them still had a little money, and some plate and jewels, left over from the days when they had been bankers and usurers and had been permitted to engage in trade.

When they were destitute, Thomas thought, the townspeople would have no more use for them.

He refused to feel sympathy for them. It was their fault, if they insisted on remaining outside the embrace of the Christian church.

And he had enough problems of his own.

The work on the Elixir had to be finished. The voices in his head, the wise and knowledgeable voices, told him so.

And there was still a chance. When brother Alfric and the Doctor had come to brother Roger's cell the previous day, they had said nothing about the manuscript. And yet Thomas had seen brother Alfric deliver it to the minister. The proctor and the Doctor, he thought, aren't so clever after all. It was almost like the chorus of a song. He sang the words again, to a nursery tune. The Doctor and the proctor aren't so clever after all. It was true. They didn't know where the manuscript was.

And so all Thomas had to do was find it before they did.

And then? If necessary, he would burn the papers. It would be painful to see years of work being turned to ash and smoke, but better than to allow the manuscript to fall into the wrong hands – the hands of brother Roger's enemies, who would use it to bring his work to a final, unfinished conclusion. The Elixir recipes were in brother Roger's memory, and Thomas knew that, given time, he could persuade the old man to remember them and continue until the Elixir was made. All Thomas needed was time, and brother Roger free to work.

He imagined the papers, piled haphazardly on a tiled floor, their corners curling and blackening in the heat of the flames that licked around them.

A thought occurred to him. Grasping the chimney, he shifted his position on the roof and looked south, away from the town, across the streams and fields -and the Dominican house, towards the river. There were two figures walking purposefully across the friary gardens below him. One was a friar; the other's long coat and multicoloured scarf were unmistakable. He put the tube to his eye: yes, it was the Doctor and brother Alfric.

They reached Trill Mill stream. Thomas followed their progress as they walked upstream along the bank. They could only be making for the old observatory.

Good, Thomas thought. He threw back his head and looked straight up at the blue dome of the sky. It hadn't rained for almost two weeks, and the sun had been hot every day. It was no surprise the Jewish house had burnt so readily.

The lady Matilda had been generous to Richard with her time, her advice and her possessions. She wanted both Richard and Nyssa to be happy, she had told him, and she was sure they would be happy together. ‘You must plan to win her, Richard,’

she had said, ‘as you would plan to take a castle. Besiege her with your devotion, bombard her with your attention, undermine her defences with your compliments, and offer her honourable terms of surrender.’

If only, he thought, love was as straightforward as soldiering. He stood in his chamber and held at arm’s length the mirror Matilda had lent to him. He was, he concluded, an upright man of goodly parts. He was tall, and his limbs were straight. His complexion and eyes were clear. His nose was crooked, it was true, as he had broken it in the tilt-yard when only a squire, and he had a dark mole on one cheek. But, taken in all, he could conclude only that he was not repulsive. The trollops who followed the King’s army had not thought so: they importuned him more often than they approached most of the other knights and even the great lords, in spite of the fact that Richard was one of the least wealthy.

Why, then, did Nyssa find it so distasteful even to look at him?

He looked at his armour, hanging on the back of the chair.

Perhaps that was it: Nyssa had never seen him in any other clothing, and it was clear she disliked his martial appearance.

Could it be that she cared for him a little, then, if she could not bear the thought of him in danger on the battlefield?

He had new clothes now. Matilda had found for him some garments from her late husband’s chest: a tunic of blue, a colour Nyssa favoured, and dark leggings of fine wool. His linen undershirt, showing at his neck and covering his arms, was so white it dazzled him. His sword belt was buckled around his waist, but without the sheath for his sword. With a few bits of jewellery, he thought, I would pass for a young lord about to go dancing at the royal court. I’m sure I would impress the Queen herself.

All the same, it felt strange to be without the rattle of his mail armour and the weight of his sword at his side.

He could not delay any longer. Nyssa would be in the garden by now sent there alone by Matilda. And soon he would have to lead the

garrison into town again: a feast day would bring in crowds, to drink and play rather than work and trade. It might be difficult to maintain order.

No there was nothing for it but to descend from the keep and seek out the lady Nyssa. He picked up the paper over which he had laboured for what had seemed like most of the previous night, and strode from his room.

The sun struck him and made him blink as he stepped out of the gatehouse. The morning was young, but already warm.

From the bare platform he looked down into the bailey: there was Nyssa, kneeling beside a bed of rose bushes. He breathed deeply. Damnation, he thought, I was less scared than this when we were ambushed by screaming Welshmen. She's only a woman, after all.

She was singing, he realised as he approached her. He stopped and listened. She had a soft, gentle voice, but the words were in a language he didn't know. It wouldn't do, he thought, to surprise her and so he made sure to tread heavily as he drew nearer.

She looked up and shielded her eyes with her hand, in which she was holding a small trowel. She was smiling, and didn't stop smiling when she recognised him. He murmured a prayer of thanks.

'Good morning, my lady,' he said. 'I'm-pleased to find you at your ease.' That had sounded all right, he thought.

Perhaps this time he would be able to engage her in conversation. But I mustn't stare at her, he told himself; it will disturb her, and rob me of my ability to speak. She looks more beautiful each time I see her.

'I can only be happy in such a wonderful garden, Richard,'

she said. 'But at ease? I think not. Weeding is hard work.'

She was teasing him. And still smiling. This was better than he had expected. 'Then stop weeding,' he said, 'and let one of the gardeners toil in your stead.'

'All the servants have gone into town,' Nyssa said.

'Apparently it's the feast of St Giles today. But the weeds don't know that. They never stop growing.' She thrust the trowel into the soil with a vigour that startled Richard. She looked up at him again. 'You're

looking very elegant today.

Are you going to church?’

Elegant! She thought him elegant! ‘No, my lady. I, ah, these clothes are not, ah... ‘ Hang it, and he’d been doing so well. He clenched his fists and concentrated. ‘I hoped to spend a little time with you, my lady.’

Nyssa lowered her eyes, and it was as if a cloud had blocked out the sun. ‘Of course,’ she said, and began to rise to her feet.

Too late, he remembered to extend his hand. She was already standing, and his fingers were almost touching her breast. He pulled back his hand as if it had been in a flame.

‘I beg your pardon, my lady,’ he said, and then he could think of nothing more to say.

He looked at her. She was no longer smiling.

‘I am just a soldier, my lady,’ he said. ‘And I can’t help that. It’s ill I know. Except that I know your face is full of sorrow, and I wish I could make you smile always. Why are you so sad, Nyssa?’

She tossed her head, and blinked her eyes, and Richard thought he saw the glint of tears. ‘It’s a long story, Richard.

Very, very long. I feel as though I’ve been running ever since my father died - perhaps even since before that. Running to find a meaning in my life, running away from the loss of my parents and my childhood, running because it stops me thinking about anything else – who ? I’ve filled every moment of my life, and yet it’s empty. Do you understand?’

Richard had no idea what she was talking about. ‘Yes, my lady,’ he said, ‘I think so.’ He looked across the deserted bailey. ‘This garden is a good place to rest from your travels.’

Nyssa smiled again, briefly, and his heart swelled in his chest. ‘That’s true. The walls are thick and strong, and Matilda’s garden is like a little paradise. I feel safe here.’

‘You are safe here, Nyssa. I’m here to protect you. I may not be much of a courtier, my lady, but I know how to fight. I would rather spill all the blood in my veins than allow a drop of yours to fall.’

What had he said that was wrong? Nyssa appeared horrified. Blood. He shouldn't have mentioned blood.

'I'm sorry, my lady. My words were unsuitable for a garden of love. And it's love that I wanted to talk about, not battles.'

But Nyssa was shaking her head, and stepping back, and had her hands raised as if to ward him off.

'No, Richard, stop, please,' she said. 'I don't want to talk about it. I can't cope with that sort of thing now. If you care for me, please don't mention it again.'

This was impossible. The more sad and frightened she looked, the more he wanted to fold her in his arms and dare the world to touch her. 'My lady, I beg you, it is because I care for you that I must speak. Am I so repulsive in your sight? Can I hope for no words of kindness?'

Now there was no doubt: bright tears were standing in Nyssa's eyes, and began to roll down her sweet face.

'It's not that,' she said, her voice an anguished moan. She squared her shoulders and wiped her eyes. 'I do like you, Richard. And I know that you like me. And that's the trouble.'

I don't want to feel these emotions. I'm drained of feeling. I can't do it any more. All I want is peace and quiet, and what you bring is turmoil and difficulty.'

She likes me. She said she likes me. I'm winning; I've made breach in her walls. I can't retreat now. Maintain the siege. I must press on. 'My lady,' Richard said, stepping forward, 'I will do whatever you command me to perform. I will ride from Oxford to Rome, shouting your name all the while. I will kill a hundred Saracens for you. I will build a tower where no one will ever find you. I will... ' He had run out of ideas. He stepped forward again, and thrust the paper towards her. 'I wrote this for you,' he said. 'I'm no poet, but the words are from my heart.'

But everything was wrong. Nyssa was leaning away from him, and looking at the paper as if it was an adder. He let it fall from his hand.

'I thought I'd find you both out here!' It was the lady Matilda's voice. Richard turned to see her hurrying from the gatehouse. He and Nyssa stood in awkward silence until Matilda reached them.

‘What’s this?’ Matilda said, stooping to pick up the crumpled paper. Richard tried to take it from her hand, but she skipped away from him. ‘A letter? A poem! I won’t read it. I expect it’s something I ought not to see. And I expect it’s addressed to you, isn’t it, Nyssa?’ She pushed the paper into Nyssa’s hand. ‘I can see the two of you are getting on marvellously. And I should leave you alone together, but I’m afraid I have news for Richard.’

Richard breathed out a sigh of relief. Thank the saints: there was something to do, and some way of taking his leave of Nyssa.

‘That chatty friar, brother Oswald, is here again. He’s brought me a tray of seedlings. But, of course, that’s not his only reason for being here.’

Richard understood. The friar had information for the chancellor. ‘In that case,’ he said, ‘I’d better see him.’ He turned to Nyssa. ‘I’m sorry, my lady,’ he said, and hoped his voice carried more than polite regret. ‘I must leave you. Be at your ease again.’ He turned away before she could respond.

He didn’t want to look into her eyes again, not yet. ‘My lady,’

he said to Matilda, ‘I have to take the men into town, as I did yesterday.’

Matilda frowned. ‘I really think you should talk to the friar,’ she said. ‘He seems very anxious. I know,’ she added,

‘why don’t you send the men into town and join them later.

You seem to have effected a transformation in them as great as my transformation of the bailey, although in the opposite way: they are now completely martial.’

‘Not by a long way, my lady,’ Richard said. ‘But I believe they may be trusted to march into the streets on their own, and to keep order. I’ll give Wulfstan the orders.’

‘And they can be my escort,’ Matilda said. ‘I’m not going to St George’s today. I thought I’d go to church in town. And,’

she added, standing on the tips of her toes to place her lips next to Richard’s ear, ‘I’ll leave you two alone together.’

Alfric was impatient to return to the friary to confront brother Roger,

but the Doctor seemed determined to inspect everything in the observatory. Like Alfric, he had walked all round the square building, and had peered closely at the mooring post and the outer door, before using Alfric's key to gain entrance.

Now, inside the dusty, gloomy chamber, the Doctor moved slowly from one table to another, stopping at each to peruse the papers, books and devices on it. 'Quite remarkable,'

he said for at least the fifth time. 'Did you see this?' He held up the paper with the drawing of a craft for sailing under water.

'Yes, Doctor,' Alfric said, with a shrug. 'But it's just a sketch. A fanciful notion.'

'Oh, I agree that it's merely a rough drawing,' the Doctor said. 'But here,' he added, shaking dust off a sheaf of papers,

'are the notes that accompany it. And the principles are sound.'

The craft could be built, and it would work.'

Alfric was intrigued. He was no shipwright or sailor, but as a mason he had always enjoyed the challenge of constructing a building according to a written plan. To build a ship that moved beneath the waves would be a wonderful thing. But he couldn't allow himself to be distracted. 'Doctor, we've seen enough. This is where I found the manuscript concerning the Elixir of Life. I think I took everything that could be used as evidence that brother Roger is still working and writing, but perhaps we can find more. We should search this table.'

The Doctor was not to be distracted. 'Your aims and mine are not precisely identical, Alfric,' he said as he leafed through another pile of papers. 'Brother Roger's theories and inventions are of paramount importance to me. And I must admit that I had no idea he had been so prolific or so far ahead of his time. It's rather worrying.'

'Worrying, Doctor? I thought you shared brother Roger's adherence to what you call the scientific method.'

'I do, Alfric. But the work in this room contains advances, most of them purely theoretical it must be said, that I would not expect to be made for another two hundred years, at the very least. Oh, and don't bother to ask me how I know that. I simply can't tell you.' He grinned. He waved his arms expansively. 'Submarines. Aircraft. Spectacles, telescopes, microscopes. Metallurgy. Magnetic fields. The motions of

the planets in the solar system. The theory of gravity, Alfric.

Apart from a knowledge of electricity this room contains everything you'd need to start an industrial revolution. It's Copernicus, Gailleo, Leonardo and Newton, all within these four walls.'

His words meant little to Alfric, but it was clear that the Doctor thought the old observatory contained significant discoveries. 'Then take whatever papers you can carry, Doctor. We'll fill the boat with them if you like. They won't last many more years in this ruin of a building.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' the Doctor muttered, and he began to collect handfuls of documents. Then he stopped, and stared up at the sloping ceiling.

It was clear he couldn't make up his mind what to do.

Alfric had never before seen the Doctor indecisive.

'What if the time isn't right?' the Doctor said. 'Perhaps all this work, these theories and machines, would be best left here to turn to dust. I just don't know. Will I change the course of events if I save Roger Bacon's most scientifically advanced work? Or will that ensure that events follow the correct course? Can I bear to leave these things here to rot? Can you smell smoke?'

'What?'

'Smoke.' The Doctor sniffed the air. 'Definitely smoke.'

Now Alfric could smell it, too, and see it. There had to be a bonfire nearby: a rapidly thickening cloud of smoke had entered through the damaged roof of the building and was gathering across the ceiling.

And then Alfric heard the crackling of flames, and he realised that the smoke wasn't from a bonfire. The observatory was burning.

Now, at last, Oswald thought, he would be able to grieve for Godwin. He would return to the friary, and go straight to the church, and pray. He felt almost light-hearted as he crossed the drawbridge that led from the castle's barbican. The chancellor could not fail to be pleased with his work, now that everything had been delivered to his knight.

Even now, though, Oswald felt uneasy in the streets of the town. The feast of St Giles was not considered an important holy day, and the

citizens now worshipping in the churches would soon emerge to drink strong ale and carouse in the streets, their numbers swelled by an influx of serfs and villeins from the fields. The more charismatic of the friars regarded feast days as opportunities to preach to large congregations, but Oswald found the crowds intimidating. He would be glad to spend the rest of the day in the friary.

As he sauntered into Friars Street he heard rapid footsteps behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw brother Thomas, who must have come through the West Gate. He stopped, so that Thomas could catch up with him, but Thomas waved his hands in an agitated way, to indicate that he wasn't returning to the friary. His sallow face was flushed, and Oswald formed the impression he had been running.

When Oswald reached the gate of the friary he looked back along the street. Brother Thomas was still standing at the other end, watching him.

Oswald fought down the rising surge of fear. There was, after all, nothing to worry about now. He had had a perfectly good reason for having been at the castle: he had been taking seedlings to the lady Matilda. No one could possibly know what he had really done.

The deepening gloom in the observatory was suddenly illuminated by a column of fire licking up the front of one of the sets of shelves. The books, as dry as pressed leaves, burst into flame.

Alfric coughed, and covered his mouth with his hand.

Everywhere he looked, on all four walls of the room, flames were curling up the shelves like diabolic creepers with leaves of fire.

Crashing against laden tables, he stumbled towards the Doctor. 'The building's on fire!' he choked.

The Doctor seemed neither surprised nor alarmed.

'Evidently so,' he said. 'I should keep down. The air is clearer close to the floor.'

He pulled his scarf up to cover his nose and mouth, then dropped to his hands and knees and began to crawl towards the door. Alfric, with his arms wrapped around the lower part of his face, stood for a moment in the centre of the room. The observatory was a cauldron of rolling black clouds. He could no longer see the ceiling or the walls, but even the dense smoke could not hide the bright ring of leaping

flames. The heat was so intense that he felt faint. He could feel his hair crisping, and the skin of his face and hands was taut and tingling.

How could a building, even one as dry as the observatory, catch fire on all sides so quickly? There was only one explanation: it had been done deliberately. Fires must have been set all round the walls.

He staggered, and fell to the floor, The Doctor was right: there was a breeze here of sweeter air, which revived him. He shook his head, and began to crawl after the Doctor.

The Doctor was waiting for him in the small antechamber.

There was less smoke here, and Alfric could see him standing by the outer door. He could also see that the upper end of the wooden staircase was burning, and he knew the antechamber would soon be as hot and acrid as the main chamber of the observatory.

‘The door’s locked,’ the Doctor said. ‘The key, Alfric, use the key!’

Alfric fumbled in the pocket of his habit and withdrew the key. Coughing, he inserted it into the lock and turned it. He pushed against the door. The wood was almost too hot to touch. The door wouldn’t open.

The Doctor seemed unaffected by the smoke. ‘I thought so,’ he said. ‘Someone knows we’re in here, and wants to make sure we don’t get out until we’re thoroughly roasted.’

Alfric’s guts swelled with panic. Burning would be a terrible way to die. He had never thought his life would end with his mortal body being blackened and cracked with heat, and he had never thought he would die unshriven. He fell to his knees and tried to pray, but all he could think about was the wickedness of the person who had trapped him and the Doctor inside a conflagration.

The Doctor was pushing and knocking against the door.

Alfric tugged at his coat. ‘The bolts,’ he wheezed. ‘It’s no good, Doctor. The bolts on the outside of the door must be drawn across.’

‘Yes, that’s probably it,’ the Doctor said. Through the thickening smoke all Alfric could see clearly of him was his brilliant grin. ‘And I think I’ve worked out where they are.’

Now if only we had... ‘

His voice faded into the roiling smoke. Alfric blinked tears from his eyes. The Doctor appeared to be standing motionless.

And then he suddenly dashed back into the inferno. The heat had obviously driven him mad.

Alfric lay on the floor, trying to drag into his mouth the last few draughts of sweet air. The heat above him was like a weight pressing him down. The flagstones beneath him were warm. This, then, was how it felt to be baked in an oven.

There was no more clean air. Only choking smoke that seared his throat. Soon he would be dead.

There was a disturbance in the smoke. The Doctor, with flames on the hem of his coat, had returned to the antechamber. 'Look!' he exclaimed, and the waving of his arms cleared the smoke for a moment. He was once again grinning like a fiend, and in his hands he carried an irregular lump of stone. 'It's a lodestone,' the Doctor said. 'It's just what we need.' He dragged the rock across the door.

'Doctor!' Alfric shouted as he tried to stand, then broke off in a fit of coughing.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor said. 'If it's necessary I'll break down the door before the flames reach us. But I want to see whether this works. Brother Bacon seems to have collected some particularly powerful lodestones. Ah! Did you hear that?

I think it's working.'

Alfric slumped to the floor, gasping in the few breaths of fresh air that were seeping under the door. The roaring and crackling of the fire in the main chamber was joined by the crash of timbers as the roof collapsed. Burning fragments of the staircase were falling in the antechamber. The Doctor had closed the door to the main chamber behind him, but now this was beginning to burn.

Alfric could feel his awareness of the world slipping away.

His eyes were closing, and the noise of the fire and the heat on his back became less intense. In a lucid moment he understood what the Doctor was trying to do: he had seen, in brother Roger's cell, the metal tube fly towards the rock the Doctor had called a lodestone. Now the Doctor was trying to use a lodestone to pull back the bolts on the other side of the door.

He also realised, as his thoughts dwindled, that the bolts on the inside of the door of the wine cellar could have been drawn across in the same way, making it appear that brother Godwin had been alone when he had died. So the Doctor must have murdered Godwin. But no, that wasn't possible. For some reason. He couldn't think any more. He was sliding into a vast, warm, comfortable pool of blackness.

He woke, coughing. He had no idea, for a moment, where he was. There was smoke everywhere. He could hardly breathe. But a tide of fresh air was washing over him and dispersing the smoke, and through a tall rectangular opening he could see blue sky.

'Door's open,' the Doctor said. 'Let's get you out of here.'

Alfric tried to stand, but his limbs were limp. The Doctor plucked him from the floor as if he weighed no more than a puppy and carried him out of the building.

Alfric lay panting in the spiky grass where the Doctor had put him down. Even here, on a spit of land that extended from the islet, he could feel the heat of the fire. Flames were leaping from what remained of the roof of the observatory.

The Doctor stood next to him. His face was blacker than a Saracen's, and his coat was smoking, but he seemed otherwise unaffected by the heat. 'Our boat's gone,' he said, indicating the nearby mooring-post.

Alfric struggled to his feet. His grey habit was singed and blackened. When he tore his gaze from the inferno and looked downstream, towards the placid fields beneath the blue sky, it seemed impossible to believe that he had just escaped death.

He couldn't see, on the river or on Trill Mill stream, both of which were flowing fast, the little boat he had once again borrowed from the miller.

'Then we're trapped here,' he croaked, 'until the fire dies.'

He and the Doctor were on the southernmost tip of the islet.

The observatory straddled almost the entire width of its centre, with only a narrow path on either side.

'We can't wait here,' the Doctor said. 'We have to talk to brother Roger. He's at the centre of everything that's been going on here. Brother Godwin was killed because he saw something, or someone.'

We know he could have been murdered at the friary's garden gate, from where the observatory is visible.'

'And brother Hubert was killed because he had the papers I found,' Alfric added, 'or because the murderer thought he had them.'

'And we had to be neutralised,' the Doctor said, 'because we're beginning to understand what's going on. Destroying the observatory, and with it all the other evidence that proves that brother Roger had been working, was presumably a bonus.'

'Are we beginning to understand, Doctor?' Alfric asked.

'Oh, yes,' the Doctor said confidently. 'As I said, brother Roger is at the centre of things. That's why we must see him.'

He turned, took a deep breath, and threw himself into the muddy, shallow water. He rolled over, splashing and spluttering. 'Come on in,' he called to Alfric. 'The water's foul, but it will keep our clothes from burning.'

Alfric understood. The Doctor was a fount of ingenious ideas. He waded into the turbid stream until the water was up to his knees, and then he lowered himself into it. With their clothes sodden, heavy, cold and dripping, he and the Doctor climbed ashore.

With a series of grinding crashes, the remaining roof timbers fell into the shell of the building. A shower of sparks ascended, followed by clouds of dense black smoke. 'The walls will go next, Doctor,' Alfric said. 'We must hurry.'

They ran. The outline of the observatory shimmered in heat haze and smoke. Its walls glowed like the walls of an oven. The Doctor led the way towards the right-hand side.

Alfric splashed into the shallows of the stream, his wet habit and the swirling water slowing his movements. The wall of the observatory was only an arm's length away, and its heat pressed against his side. He breathed in the heat, and the smoke. Flames licked out as the fire consumed the fabric of the building. This, Alfric thought, must be what it is like to be pursued by demons through the fiery catacombs of hell.

And then the heat was behind him, and he could regain dry land, and he and the Doctor were at the northern end of the islet.

As Alfric stood gasping for breath, his hands on his knees, the Doctor walked on a little way.

‘This is how the arsonist reached the observatory,’ he said, pointing to a beam of wood that had been placed between the islet and Castle Bridge island, the long lozenge of land that separated the main flow of the Thames from the Castle Mill stream. ‘And it’s probably how he left. He planned to trap us without a boat on the far side of the islet, if we managed to survive the fire.’

‘I’ll tell the miller some other time,’ Alfric said as he tiptoed his way across the beam, ‘that I’ve lost his boat.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said, holding out his hand to help him on to the firm ground of Castle Bridge island. ‘Now we have to return to the friary. You saw how I opened the door of the observatory?’

‘I did,’ Alfric said, ‘and I understand now how brother Godwin came to be bolted, but not locked, in the wine cellar.

Whoever killed him must have used a lodestone.’

‘And there’s only one friar who has a collection of lodestones,’ the Doctor said. ‘Roger Bacon.’

For reasons of secrecy Richard had interviewed brother Oswald in the topmost room of the keep. It had been built as a lookout post, accessible only by a narrow spiral stairway, but Matilda had furnished it with the chairs, cushions and wall hangings with which she had decked every room in the castle, so that now it was a belvedere in which one could sit and enjoy views in all directions.

Although the friar had left some time previously, Richard was still in the room. From time to time he turned to the table on which were spread out the papers the friar had brought.

They were covered in tiny writing, in Latin. Here and there the continuous text gave way to a diagram or a list. Richard could hardly decipher a word of it, but it fascinated him.

Brother Oswald had been desperate to impress on him that the papers were important and valuable. He had been less voluble Richard noted, on the subject of how he had obtained them. The chancellor would be pleased to receive them, Oswald had said. They were the evidence that brother Roger –

the grey friar who had been known as *Doctor Mirabilis*, and of whom even Richard had heard hair-raising stories - was defying the rules of his order. They would give the chancellor influence over the Oxford Franciscans. Furthermore they were, almost certainly, the cause and subject of the death of brother Hubert. Oswald claimed that he himself had been in danger of his life.

Richard stared at the tiny writing. It seemed far-fetched to him that words on paper – even so many words on so many leaves of paper - could be so powerful. But at Oswald's insistence he had made a holy vow to deliver both the papers and Oswald's message to the chancellor, and now he would have to do so.

All the same, he was reluctant to leave the lookout post.

Through the south and east windows he could look down into the bailey. And in the bailey, sitting in her accustomed bower reading a book and looking more colourful, natural and pretty than all the flowers around her, was Nyssa.

There was a quill on the table, and a horn of ink. There was no point in trying to talk to her again: every time he approached her he alarmed her and made a fool of himself. But he could write to her, if he concentrated hard and took his time to recall how to form the letters. He knew he should go down to his room, put on his armour, take Oswald's papers to the chancellor, and then take command of the castle troops in the streets of the town.

But he tore a small blank piece from one of the pages scattered on the table, dipped the quill in the ink, and stared clown at Nyssa as he tried to compose a letter.

'If we still had the boat,' Alfric pointed out to the Doctor as they tramped across the fields and pasture on Castle Bridge island, 'we would have reached the friary gardens by now.'

'I know,' the Doctor replied, 'and I find it very worrying, don't you, that our arsonist took the trouble to strand us on the islet just in case we escaped the fire? It suggests that he's cunning and thoughtful. And that he has a reason for wanting us kept out of his way. We must hurry. Is that the mill?'

Alfric would have thought the huge stone building was unmistakable. 'Yes,' he said. 'We can join the Faringdon road here, go over Castle Bridge, and enter the town through the West Gate.'

As they walked over the bridge Alfric looked downstream.

A thick column of smoke was hanging above the remains of the observatory. He could see no one in the fields on the banks of the river. The conflagration seemed to have attracted no attention. Everyone, he presumed, had gone into town for the holy day.

‘I’m surprised, Doctor,’ he said, as he tried to match his companion’s pace, ‘that you’re not more troubled by the damage the fire has done. Everything in the observatory must surely be destroyed.’

‘It’s quite a relief, in way, you know. The fire took the problem out of my hands. It will be up to brother Roger, now, to decide how many of his theories he wishes to bequeath to the future.’

‘Not entirely, Doctor,’ Alfric said. ‘The minister-general will have something to say about it. Particularly if I retrieve the papers I gave to brother Hubert.’

They strode on, side by side, in silence, alongside the castle’s moat and under the lowering gaze of its ramparts.

‘I’m glad Nyssa’s in there,’ the Doctor commented, nodding towards the walls and towers. ‘She’s safe, and I don’t think she’s in the mood for adventures.’

As soon as they were through the West Gate they were engulfed in crowds. Alfric realised that everyone, from the huddles of grave-faced merchants to the packs of half-drunk peasants, was staring at him and the Doctor.

‘We smell and look as though we’ve been roasted on a spit,’ Alfric said. ‘And from my habit you’d say I was a follower of Dominic, not Francis.’

‘Make way!’ the Doctor shouted, waving his arms. ‘Let us through!’

The crowds parted and, with the comments and jests of the revellers ringing in their ears, he and Alfric raced for the friary gate.

Without stopping they ran through the corridors to the darter and to the door of brother Roger’s cell. It was open, and brother Roger was alone.

‘Where’s Thomas?’ Alfric said.

Brother Roger was kneeling in the centre of the room. He looked up slowly 'The bells have rung for sext,' he said. 'Will you join me in prayer?'

'I can pray later,' Alfric said, 'and I'm sure I'll be forgiven. This can't wait. Where's Thomas?'

Brother Roger looked at Alfric, from the top of his head to his sandals, and gave the Doctor the same inspection. 'You come to my cell looking as though you've been cleaning the kitchen chimneys, you interrupt my prayers, and you demand to know the whereabouts of my assistant. I should report your behaviour to the proctor. But of course, you are the proctor.'

Don't interrupt! I'll answer your question, however rudely delivered. I have no idea where brother Thomas is. And even less concern.'

Alfric sighed. This was going to be a difficult meeting.

Brother Roger put his hand on one of the beds and pulled himself upright. Meanwhile the Doctor had begun to walk round the room.

'This is what I was looking for,' the Doctor said. 'Your excellent array of lodestones, brother Roger. Do you find much use for them?' He selected two of the largest and hefted them in his hands. 'I'd like to try a practical exercise,' he said as he went towards the old man. 'Would you take one of these from me?'

Brother Roger cupped his hands, and the Doctor placed one of the rocks in them. Roger almost dropped the lodestone, and his hands shook with the effort of holding it.

'Can you lift it, brother?' the Doctor asked. 'To the level of your shoulders, perhaps?'

It was clear that the old friar could barely prevent the rock from falling to the floor. 'It's too heavy, Doctor,' he complained. 'Brother Alfric is a sturdy fellow. Let him hold the stone aloft.'

'That's not necessary,' the Doctor said, retrieving the rock.

'I think I've proved my point, proctor?'

Alfric nodded. The fact that brother Roger couldn't lift the lodestone didn't prove he hadn't killed brother Godwin, but he certainly couldn't have done it alone. And, when Alfric and the Doctor had burst into his

cell, he hadn't reacted as if he was surprised to see them alive.

'Brother Roger,' Alfric said. 'Please forgive our sudden intrusion. But we are in haste, and we must know the truth.'

We know you have been writing a manuscript about the Elixir of Life. Where are the papers?'

'Ah,' brother. Roger said. 'I see.' He shut his eyes, and sighed. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.' He settled on to his bed as if preparing to sleep.

Alfric took a step towards him. He repressed his urge to shake the venerable teacher. 'We know' you have been working in your old observatory,' he said. 'We know that the papers were given to brother Hubert, that Hubert's cell was searched, that the papers are now missing, and that Hubert was found murdered the following morning. This is a grave matter, brother. Where are the papers now?'

Brother Roger turned, dragged his thin legs off the bed, and set his feet on the floor. 'I do not know,' he said. 'The last time I saw the manuscript it was in the observatory, Is that clear enough?' He stood up, and faced Alfric belligerently.

'The Elixir of Life,' the Doctor said. 'What a stupendous subject. The zenith of your studies, brother Roger. The manuscript must represent the conclusions of months of work.'

Years. Wouldn't you like to know where it is? Aren't you even a little curious?'

'To be frank, Doctor,' brother Roger said, 'I'm glad to be rid of it. It had become a burden to me.'

'Then why did you continue with the work?' Alfric asked.

'You know that in doing so you were defying the rules of the order and the instructions of the minister.'

'I have few ambitions left,' brother Roger said. 'I confess, proctor, that my reasons for joining the order, many years ago now, were not pure. I had exhausted my store of wealth, and my only source of income was teaching. And I couldn't bear the thought of spending the rest of my life in schoolrooms.'

Here I found tranquillity, I was fed and clothed and sheltered, and my

observatory was close by. The friary, I believe, gained some benefit from having me here as one of the brothers, and in return the minister turned a blind eye to my occasional visits to my island in the river.'

'That's as I thought,' Alfric said.

'As the years went by I went less often to the observatory.

My health was not always good. And I came to appreciate a life of prayer and poverty, although I admit that I never took to preaching. As I said, I had few ambitions. Until brother Thomas came to assist me.'

Alfric and the Doctor exchanged a glance. 'Go on,' the Doctor said.

'I took him in because he was young, tall and strong,'

brother Roger said. 'As I became more frail I needed someone to carry for me. At first he seemed slow-witted, but I think he learnt from being in my company. He took it into his head that I should resume my studies into natural philosophy. He had heard that alchemists have for centuries tried to create a substance that cures all ills and brings endless life, and he said that if anyone could make such a thing, I could.' He sighed. 'I succumbed to his flattery, even though I knew the task to be beyond any mortal man. I began to work again, merely to humour him.'

'And why did you continue?' the Doctor said.

'Thomas became obsessed with the Elixir of Life,' brother Roger said. 'And, as I've mentioned, he is young and tall and strong. I was unable to resist him. He can be very persuasive.'

The old teacher untied the rope of his habit, turned his face to the wall and allowed the garment to fall to his waist. His thin back was crisscrossed with fading lines: the weals left by the lashes of a whip.

The noise made by the revellers in the town reached into the cloisters, carried on light gusts of breeze. Oswald hardly noticed. He was sitting in the sunlight, on the stone parapet under one of the arches, and he was trying to get used to being free from anxiety.

The chancellor couldn't fail to be pleased with the papers he had delivered. Now, at last, Philip of Seaby would surely release him from his service. Oswald thought that he had done enough. And he could feel the chancellor's grip loosening now that Godwin was dead: he had

served the chancellor to protect Godwin, rather than his own reputation and, if he defied the chancellor, what was the worst the chancellor could do? He could tell the new minister, when one was appointed, what he knew about Oswald. It was an old story now, and even if the minister cared enough to discipline him – well, what would happen, would happen. Oswald felt strangely serene at the prospect. He had been hiding his secret for so long that he had forgotten what it felt like to be free of worries. But he was beginning to remember.

And, although he knew it was a sin, Oswald couldn't help feeling a little proud. Someone – brother Roger, perhaps – had been so desperate to have the papers that he had committed murder in his search: for that, Oswald realised, must be the explanation for the death of brother Hubert, and perhaps for Godwin's death, too. And it must have been the murderer who had tried to enter Oswald's cell during the night. He felt a tremor of remembered fear, and almost enjoyed the sensation.

He, Oswald, had had the wit to understand the conversation he overheard between the Doctor and brother Alfric; he had had the courage to go to brother Hubert's cell, and to take away the papers; and he had had the fortitude to withstand the siege of his cell, when there had been only a door between himself and a murderer. And, finally, he had delivered the papers to the chancellor's knight.

And now it was all over.

He heard footsteps, running. He turned. Brother Alfric and the Doctor, their faces as black as soot, ran into the cloisters, His heart leapt to his throat. They ran past him.

He smiled, and relaxed. Then he heard the footsteps stop, and return.

'Brother Oswald,' the proctor shouted, 'have you seen brother Thomas?'

They didn't want him. He was still safe. 'Yes, brother,'

Oswald said. 'As I was coming from the castle. Not long ago.'

I'd gone there only because the lady Matilda asked me to: I took her a box of seedlings, that's all.'

'Yes, yes. But where was Thomas?'

It was true. They weren't interested in him at all. 'He was coming into

town, through the West Gate.'

'But where did he go?'

'I'm sorry, brother. I don't know.'

Brother Alfric muttered under his breath, and Oswald was sure the words were both blasphemous and vulgar. 'Doctor, he could be anywhere. And the streets are seething with people.'

'Let's go to see the chancellor,' the Doctor said. 'He should be informed, and he has the authority to order a search and the manpower to carry it out.'

Brother Alfric and the Doctor sped away, leaving in their wake the scent of burnt wood.

Brother Thomas. Yes, of course. He was fiercely loyal to brother Roger. He would try to recover papers stolen from his master. And he was big and strong enough to knock down either Godwin or brother Hubert, or both.

The tide of cares that had ebbed from Oswald's mind came flooding back. He should follow brother Alfric, and tell him everything. Brother Thomas, if he was the murderer, must have learnt that Oswald had the papers. And he had seen Oswald, empty-handed, leave the castle. What should he do?

Oswald clenched his fists and felt tears of impotent rage squeeze from his tightly shut eyes. He should return to the castle; he should go to the chancellor; he should shut himself in his cell for protection.

He couldn't decide. He sat in the sun and wept.

The silence was complete. The castle was deserted. Sometimes the breeze carried the distant sound of a voice over the high walls. Sometimes one of the pennants flapped, or a pigeon cooed in one of the trees. But these sounds merely reminded Nyssa that she was alone.

It was a relief to have the place to herself. She didn't have to think of what to say, she didn't have to be polite; there was no one to ask after her, or engage her in conversation. All the soldiers had gone on patrol; all the servants and gardeners had gone into town for the holy day; Matilda had gone to church.

She could allow her mind to be as empty as the castle.

She sat in the depths of her bower, with her feet tucked under her, and imagined that no one existed.

But even now she could not be entirely at peace. Richard had not yet left. Occasionally she heard his war-horse neighing in the stable, and each time she felt a pang of anxiety. He was somewhere in the castle. She didn't know where. She didn't want to know. She wanted him to leave her alone.

Even here, she thought, even in my garden retreat there's trouble and difficulty. Things to be dealt with. People who can't be avoided. If I could make myself deaf, and blind, and mute, she thought, perhaps then I would find some peace. But no: people would try to communicate by touching me, and that would be even worse.

If only I could find a way out of all this.

Her thoughts were interrupted. She thought she heard footsteps. Was there someone in the stable-block, or the bakery? Silence again. And then, again, faint sounds. And silence once more.

She told herself she was imagining things. Or it was only Richard, going to saddle his horse. Whoever it was, if there was anyone there at all, he wouldn't notice her: she was tucked away in her overgrown bower. She could be seen, she thought, only from the battlements at the top of the keep, and there was no one up there. And she would see no one, because she would keep her eyes closed.

Perhaps, she thought in the darkness behind her closed lids, perhaps I'll sleep here for a little while. If only I could sleep forever.

'This is not a convenient time,' the chancellor declared. 'Tell them to make an appointment.' Alfric heard the chancellor's testy voice through the half-open door.

'Excuse me,' the Doctor said, and lifted from the floor the servant who was blocking the doorway into the chancellor's chamber. He set the man down at his side and pushed open the door. 'This can't wait, chancellor,' he stated.

Alfric followed him into the room. The chancellor was levering his bulky body from the chair behind his table. Beside him a clerk from the Carmelite friary and a liveried servant stood open-mouthed in surprise. Even the chancellor was momentarily lost for words when he saw the condition of his visitors' clothes and faces.

‘I’ve got my hands full, brother Alfric,’ he said. ‘There’s been arson committed this morning in the Jewish quarter, and I’ve been told there were deaths. I’m sure you saw, as you arrived, that my courtyard is awash with Jews who have been driven from their houses. The streets are already full of drunken peasants and even drunker scholars, and there are still six hours of daylight. The mayor and the burgesses are nowhere to be found, which is typical of them on a holy day.

And although Richard’s sent the entire garrison out into the town, which is a blessing, for some reason he’s still skulking up at the castle. So, as you can imagine, I’m a little busy. Why don’t you go to the friary, get yourselves washed and changed into clean clothes, and come back when you’re not stinking like a bonfire.’

‘We know who the murderer is,’ the Doctor said.

That shut the chancellor up. It took Alfric aback, too: he wasn’t that certain he knew the murderer’s identity.

‘It’s Thomas, brother Roger’s companion. He knew he could move metal bolts, even on the other side of a door, with a lodestone, and he has the strength to do it. That’s how he made it appear that brother Godwin had bolted himself into the wine cellar. He seemed to know Godwin had been murdered, even though at the time only Alfric and I knew it. He is one of the few people, even now, who know of the existence of, er, certain papers that brother Hubert had in his cell. On the afternoon of brother Hubert’s murder he left brother Roger’s lecture early, and he had with him a donkey cart in which he could have hidden Hubert’s body and moved it to Jewry Lane.

If we ever find the cart, I expect there will be bloodstains in it.

Oh, and someone - probably Thomas - has just tried to fry brother Alfric and me. Hence the state of our clothes.’

Now that the Doctor had stated all the facts, Alfric could see there was no other explanation. And, although in his exposition the Doctor had been careful to protect brother Roger, Alfric was aware that there were now even more indications of Thomas’s guilt: his obsession with the Elixir of Life, and his brutal treatment of the old man.

‘Chancellor, do you have any idea where brother Thomas might be?’ Alfric asked. ‘It is said that you have eyes and ears in most of the religious houses. Is Thomas in your service? We have to know.’

The chancellor held up his hands. ‘It’s all right. You’ve convinced me.

And I'll overlook the insulting suggestion that I would harbour a killer. There were only two of your friars, proctor, who were occasionally kind enough to keep me informed about the inner workings of your house. Can't you guess who they were? Godwin, rest his soul, and his, er, fellow, Oswald.'

Alfric had had no idea that the two friars served the chancellor, but he was not surprised. The Doctor's face, however, showed consternation.

'Oswald!' he exclaimed. 'Of course. As an agent of the chancellor, he would make it his business to know what's going on in the friary. He's been spying on us. He must have overheard us, or seen Hubert taking the papers into his cell. He took the papers during the afternoon, while Hubert was away from his cell. Then, when Thomas went to Hubert's cell, of course he couldn't find the papers. I assume Hubert interrupted Thomas as he was engaged in his fruitless search.

And so Hubert had to be killed. Then Thomas searched your cell, Alfric. And still he didn't find the papers. Having disposed of us, as he thinks, his sole aim now is to retrieve the papers at any cost. There can be no doubt that he'll kill again, if he has to, to get them.'

'I'm intrigued,' the chancellor said, 'by this mysterious talk of "papers". I would ask you to enlighten me, but for the fact that I will soon know for myself. But how do you suppose that brother Thomas, who is reputed to be one of the more dimwitted of the friars, was able to discover all the same information as Oswald?'

'Thomas is cleverer than he looks,' the Doctor said. He pulled from one of his pockets a metal tube that Alfric recognised. 'And it helped him to have at his disposal brother Roger's remarkable inventions.'

He put the tube to his eye, and then passed it to the chancellor, who very cautiously followed his example.

'By all the saints!' the chancellor exclaimed. 'My apologies, proctor, but this thing must be magical.'

'Not at all,' the Doctor said, prising the tube from the chancellor's fingers. 'Merely applied physics. But what did you mean when you said you will soon know for yourself the nature of the papers that were in Hubert's cell?'

'Well, I don't know if that's what it is,' the chancellor blustered, 'but I know Oswald was very keen to deliver something to me. At first I thought he simply wanted to convey information: it sounded as if he

had some guilty secret to impart. But then it transpired that there is a physical burden he wished to unload on me.'

'So it's here?' the Doctor cried. 'You have the manuscript here?'

'Not yet,' the chancellor replied cautiously. 'I didn't want Oswald to be seen coming to this house. I arranged a meeting.'

As you know, I am connected to the de Marennes. The lady Matilda is my kinswoman, and she in residence at the castle.

Richard of Hockley, in the service of Guy de Marenne, is constable of the castle, and reports to me daily. Matilda and Oswald have a common interest in gardening, of all things, and so I imagine Hubert suspected nothing when Matilda asked that Oswald should -'

'So Oswald took the papers to the castle,' the Doctor said.

'Is that it?' The look of exasperation on his face was replaced by an expression of alarm and despair. 'Alfric! Thomas saw Oswald leaving the castle. Oswald told us so. Nyssa's in the castle. And she's alone. The garrison troops are all here, in the town.'

'We must go at once,' Alfric said. 'Chancellor, send as many men as you can to follow us.'

'The lady Nyssa is not alone,' the chancellor called as Alfric and the Doctor fled through the doorway. 'Richard is still there. And he is a valiant knight.'

'You should have been wearing your armour, sir knight,'

Thomas said to the dying man at his feet. 'You wouldn't have been such an easy kill.'

He stepped carefully over the stream of blood running from beneath the knight's body. He picked up a cushion and used it to wipe clean the knife he had picked up in the castle's kitchen. Richard of Hockley's face still wore an expression of puzzled surprise, unchanged since the moment when Thomas had slid the blade between his ribs.

'You didn't expect it, did you?' Thomas said conversationally. 'A friar, carrying a knife. You weren't prepared. Too busy trying to write.' With the point of the blade he flicked the scrap of paper on which the knight had scrawled a few badly formed words.

He collected together the pages of the Elixir manuscript and hugged them to his chest. For the first time since he had killed brother Godwin he felt untroubled. Even the voices in his head were quiet.

When he had entered the castle, and found the gatehouse unattended and the bailey deserted, he had hardly been able to believe his luck. All he would have to do, he thought, was find the manuscript and take it away. But as he had searched the keep, from the cellars upwards, the voices had become more and more impatient and agitated, until he had found it difficult to concentrate on walking silently. He had encountered no one, but neither had he found the manuscript.

By the time he had reached the topmost landing of the keep, and searched all the chambers leading from it, so that all that remained to be explored was a narrow spiral stairway, the voices were screaming in his skull.

But here, in this little sunlit chamber with windows in each of its walls, he had found the chancellor's knight sitting in a chair, bent over the table, laboriously shaping letters with a quill.

And on the table was the manuscript.

Thomas had been unable to think of a way to take the manuscript without being seen by the knight. Therefore the knight had, had to be killed. There had been no time to plan anything more complicated, and the voices, although exultant, were still impatient.

Now that he held the manuscript in his arms they were a distant murmuring in his mind. And their quietness allowed him to hear the sound of footsteps.

‘Richard? Where are you?’

It was a woman's voice, coming from below, in the keep.

A lady, by the accent. Could it be the lady Matilda? Had she returned to the castle, or had she been in the garden all the while? Thomas realised that he had not bothered to look into the bowers and pavilions and grottoes that littered the bailey.

‘He must have gone into town,’ Thomas heard the lady say to herself. And then he heard her start to climb the stairs.

He gripped the handle of the knife, but the voices told him he didn't have to kill her. He could hide, and watch. Perhaps there would be a

way to make it look as though the lady had killed the knight.

He stepped over the body. The knight was taking a long time to die. In passing Thomas thrust the blade through the man's throat, It wouldn't do to have the knight able to tell the lady who his killer had been.

Thomas stepped into one of the window embrasures and pulled the tapestry next to it a little way across, so that he was concealed. He stabbed the material with the knife and made a slit through which he could see.

The lady appeared in the doorway opposite his hiding-place.

She was young. He recognised her: the noblewoman who had been with the Doctor outside the friary gate on the night Godwin's body had been found.

She didn't see the knight's body at first. Thomas held his breath expecting her to cry out, perhaps scream, perhaps faint, perhaps run from the room.

Her eyes widened when she saw the body and the blood.

And that was all. Her face remained expressionless. Thomas wondered whether she, too, had voices in her mind telling her what to do and how to act.

Then he saw a single tear roll down her cheek, and she spoke. 'Oh, no,' she whispered. 'Not again. Not here. When will it ever end?' She stood in the doorway. She turned away, as if to leave, and then looked back.

Go away, Thomas thought at her. Leave, lady, so that I may return to the friary. I have the manuscript. Hubert, Alfric and the Doctor are dead. There is no one left who suspects what I have done. Brother Roger can complete his work, and the Elixir will be created at last.

But the lady didn't go, and she was still standing, irresolute, in the doorway when the body on the floor convulsed, and turned on its side.

'He's alive,' the lady breathed, and she walked into the room. 'Richard, what have you done?' she said, and she stepped over the pool of blood to kneel by his head.

With surprising strength she lifted his shoulders on to her knees.

‘Heavens, you’re wounded,’ she said. ‘Richard, did you do this?’ She looked around her, evidently searching for the weapon she thought he must have used. ‘Did someone do this to you? Richard, can you speak?’

Behind the tapestry Thomas gripped the knife. If the knight told the lady who had wounded him, then the lady would have to be despatched immediately.

He saw the knight’s head move, and he heard a viscous gurgling. He smiled. The stab to the knight’s throat hadn’t finished him, but it had been enough to silence him.

‘Hush, hush,’ the lady whispered as she stroked the knight’s head. She stared vacantly towards one of the windows, and then down at the knight when she saw that his arm was moving.

Thomas fought down his rising impatience. At last the knight’s slow movements stopped. The lady sighed, and lifted his head from her lap and placed it on the floor. She knelt beside him for a few more moments before she touched his face with her fingertips and closed his eyelids. Then she stood, looked around the room one more time, looked again at the floor, and slowly walked to the door.

Thomas waited behind the tapestry until the sound of the lady’s footsteps had receded into silence. Then he stepped out of the window embrasure and, with the manuscript still clutched to his chest, tiptoed towards the doorway.

He didn’t know why he glanced again at the body. When he did he saw that in his dying moments, cradled in the lady’s arms, the knight had used his fingers and his spilt blood to scrawl a few words on the tiles of the floor.

The Latin was execrable in terms of both spelling and grammar, but Thomas could understand its meaning. *Brother Thomas did this*, it said. Beneath this there was a second line, which consisted of just two words: *love*, and a nonsense word, *Nissa*.

Thomas swore under his breath. If he could read and understand the words, then he had to assume the lady had done so. There would have to be one more killing.

As Nyssa stepped from the cool, dark interior of the keep on to the stair-platform, its flagstones as hot as a griddle in the afternoon sunlight, she felt she could breathe for the first time since she had

seen Richard lying on the floor in the belvedere.

The gardens lay before her, a patchwork of geometrical shapes and colours, bounded by the painted walls and towers. Its order, tranquillity and emptiness were emphasised by the snatches of riotous clamour that were carried on the breeze from the streets of the town.

Nothing had changed. She began to walk down the stone steps towards the bailey. She would go to her bower, and sit among the flowers. After a while she would pick up her book, and begin reading again. She would become calm, and she would cease to think about the things she had just seen in the topmost room of the keep. The memories would become no more than the half-forgotten fragments of a bad dream. She had obliterated so many memories already. She could paint over a few more.

But she should tell someone about Richard. There was no hurry: he was dead. But then, she couldn't begin to erase the sight of his body, writhing in a pool of blood, until after she had passed the problem on to someone else. And he had been killed by a monk or a friar, it seemed. That was probably important, too.

She sighed. She had to do something. She couldn't rest yet. It seemed she could never rest. She reached the foot of the stairway, and set off slowly towards the stables and the gatehouse.

.She became aware of the sound of running feet. Someone was behind her. But there was no one in the castle. No one but her and Richard.

Of course. It must be Richard's killer. Perhaps he had been in the belvedere, or hiding in one of the rooms below, all the time that Richard had been bleeding to death with his head on her knees. He probably intended to kill Nyssa, too.

She stopped, and turned. A big man in a grey habit was leaping, two steps at a time, down the stairway to the bailey.

Brother Thomas, then. A Franciscan. She remembered him now: he had been one of the friars standing at the gate when Richard had demanded entrance to the friary. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

The man was running fast. She turned again, and looked towards the gatehouse. If she started to run, could she reach the barbican before he caught up with her? If she shouted, would anyone hear?

No. There was no point in trying to resist. She sighed, and walked off

the main path. She was making for the bower in which she liked to sit and read.

The footsteps behind her slowed, presumably because the friar had realised that she was no longer heading towards the gatehouse. She frowned: if he was going to kill her, there was no point in delaying it.

She reached the wooden seat and sat down among the cushions. Rambling showers of roses enclosed her almost entirely. She didn't pick up her book. She watched the friar as he walked towards her.

'Brother Thomas,' she said as he drew near.

'My lady,' he replied. He didn't bow. He stood a little way in front of her. Without taking his gaze from her he set down on the path, beside his feet, the bundle of papers he was carrying, and carefully weighted them down with a handful of pebbles. When he stood straight again, all he was holding was a long-bladed knife.

Nyssa found that she could smile. 'I suppose you're going to kill me now,' she said. The words were surprisingly easy to say.

'Yes,' he said. 'Don't move.' He took a step forward.

'Where can I go?' Nyssa said. She was irritated by his lack of understanding. 'I have nowhere to run to. I've finished with running. This is the place where I'll find peace, one way or another.' She leant forward so that she could take a final look around the gardens.

'I'm going to make it look as though you killed the knight,' Thomas said. 'And then you killed yourself. Perhaps in a fit of remorse.'

Nyssa shrugged. The details didn't concern her.

Thomas was grinning - almost leering at her. 'I have a demon in my mind,' he said. 'Many voices, but all from the same demon. My mind used to be like mud, but the demon helps me to think as clearly as water from a spring. He tells me what to do.'

Nyssa loosened the collar of her robe and, beneath it, the ties of her shift. She wanted the knife to enter cleanly and easily.

'My demon has discovered a taste for killing,' Thomas said. 'But you will be the last. I have killed five. Maybe more.'

I don't know whether any died in the fire I set in the Hebrew house.

You must be the last. But I will enjoy killing you.’ He seemed worried that Nyssa might not appreciate the care he was taking. ‘I will cut open your veins, and together we’ll watch the blood flow out. Come with me.’

He took another step forward, and held out his hand.

What did he want? Nyssa didn’t understand. She was in her rose-surrounded bower, in her high-walled garden; this was where she wanted to find the ultimate peace of oblivion.

‘We must return to the keep,’ Thomas insisted. ‘You must be found lying alongside the knight. Your blood mingling with his. Perhaps his hand clasped in yours. I’ll arrange all that after you’re dead.’ He reached towards her.

Nyssa recoiled, and shrank into the depths of the bower.

Her fingers found something cool and hard among the cushions. Her hand closed around it. It was the hilt of the knife Richard had placed there.

But what was the point of it? She had to die one day, and it might as well be now. She was so tired of struggling. She searched within herself, and she could find no whisper of a desire to fight. ‘I’ve had enough,’ she shouted at the friar. She opened the collar of her robe. ‘Do it now.’

‘Not here,’ he said. ‘You must come with me.’

His hand, bent like a claw, came to close around her wrist.

His face, slick with sweat, was only inches from hers. Sunlight danced on the blade of his knife.

‘No!’ Nyssa yelled, and pulled her hand from under the cushions. He started back, but not quickly enough to avoid the blow she had launched to defend herself. Richard’s knife was still in her hand as she struck the side of his forehead.

The friar fell to the ground, screaming, holding his hand to his head. Blood streamed from between his fingers.

‘Nyssa! Nyssa!’ It was the Doctor’s voice.

Nyssa stood up, stepped over the friar, and saw the Doctor and

another grey-robed man running from the gatehouse. She waved to them.

‘Nyssa,’ the Doctor panted as he reached her. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘I’m all right,’ Nyssa said. ‘I’m all right now.’

Chapter Seven

The voices had gone. He used to have voices in his head. Now his head was a quiet place.

Pain. There was pain, instead of the voices. He opened his eyes, and saw straight lines, arranged in patterns, dark against a white background. Roof timbers. They were roof timbers, and he was looking up at a ceiling. The ceiling of a big, tall room. Flooded with light. The pain throbbed. He closed his eyes.

He could move his hands. He could feel soft cloth as he moved them. He realised that he was lying on his back in a bed. It was difficult to know things, without the demon to explain things to him. Slowly he pulled his hand out from beneath the linen, and brought it to the side of his head. That was where the pain was: here, on the side - the left side – of his forehead.

And there was something hard under his fingers. Not bone.

Sharper than bone. Something that wasn’t a part of him.

Metal. Burning hot. As he touched it, he heard an echo of the voices.

It was the tip of the blade of a knife. How did he know that? He had been going to kill. And suddenly he remembered, and he babbled a prayer to the saints. He had been going to kill the pretty young lady. And she had struck him, with a knife, here, at the side of his forehead, and the blade had broken, and it was still in the wound.

And the demon was trapped inside the metal. It was still there, but its voices couldn’t speak to him.

When he opened his eyes again there were people around his bed. He knew some of them: brother Alfric, from the friary, and the Doctor. Brother Alfric and the Doctor weren’t dead, then. He thought he remembered that they had been killed.

‘He’s awake,’ a voice said.

‘Can you hear me, brother?’ That was brother Alfric’s voice.

He nodded.

‘You’re in the hospital of the Augustinian friary,’ brother Alfric said.

The walls were as white as snow. He turned his head, and felt a twinge of pain. He could see blue sky through the tall windows at one end of the long room. When he looked in the other direction he saw that the other end of the room was a single vast arch, beyond which was a church. There the walls were painted in bright colours, and at the end the tall windows were made of coloured glass. There was a tall, golden cross.

The sight made him feel comfortable.

‘He seems disoriented,’ the Doctor said. ‘The blow to his head may have damaged his brain.’

Brother Alfric leant towards him. ‘Do you remember what you have done?’

He nodded, although in truth his memories were mixed up.

His thoughts were full of visions of fire and blood. He was sure that he used to be able to think better. It was as if the things he saw with his mind were blurred, when once they had been sharp. There had been a time, before the fire and the blood – but he couldn’t remember.

‘Who am I?’ he asked.

He saw the Doctor and brother Alfric look at each other.

Were they ghosts? Were they real?

‘He could be trying to deceive us, Doctor. The knife went deep into his skull, but the wound was small.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘All you can do is watch him as he recovers,’ he said. He leant forwards. His eyes and teeth seemed unnaturally large. ‘Your name is Thomas,’ he said.

‘No!’ he shouted, surprising himself with the echoing loudness of his voice. Faces loomed around him, hands held him down. ‘No, not Thomas. Thomas is the demon. He had many voices. He told me what to do.’

‘If it’s an act,’ the Doctor said, ‘then it’s a good one. I wonder what kind of demon it was?’

‘The kind of demon that hopes to avoid appearing before the King’s assizes,’ brother Alfric said dryly. ‘If he’s insane he has a chance of avoiding a trial, and we Franciscans will probably have to look after him.’

He didn’t understand what they were talking about. He lay still. Brother Alfric spoke to him again. ‘You’ve sinned, brother. You’ve committed grievous crimes. Can you remember? Will you confess?’

He wanted to confess. ‘I did as the voices bade me,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you everything. I want...’ He couldn’t remember the word. He turned away from the eyes staring down at him, and he saw the golden cross. ‘Sanctuary,’ he said. ‘All I want is sanctuary.’

Alfric and the chancellor faced each other across the chancellor’s parchment-strewn table.

‘I’ve written to the minister-general,’ Alfric said. ‘He’s in Avignon, I believe. I’ve sent two of the brothers. It will take a few weeks before we know his decision.’

The chancellor shrugged. ‘It may be a few weeks before Thomas is well enough to stand trial. He might even recover his wits. You’ve suggested, as we agreed, that he should be tried before the King’s assize?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Alfric replied. Why did the man have to be reassured so frequently? ‘Reluctant as I am to turn one of my brothers over to the secular courts, I understand that it is necessary.’ He sighed. ‘The whole town – the whole world, if it’s interested – must be told that one of the Oxford Franciscans has killed two friars and a knight.’

A gaunt figure stirred in the corner of the room. ‘Thank you, brother,’ the rabbi said. ‘My people say there is no Christian justice, but now they will see that they can trust the Christian laws. A mother and her two children died in the fire that brother Thomas started. There must be justice for them, too.’

‘That’s by the way,’ the chancellor said gruffly. ‘The important thing is that once the murderer has been tried, in public, the tradesmen and the scholars will have only the usual excuses for riotous behaviour and fighting in the streets.’

‘For your part, chancellor,’ Alfric said, ‘are you sure that, as we agreed, Thomas will be returned to us for discipline after the trial, and not be subjected to the rigours of secular punishments?’

‘Like you, proctor, I’ve done what I can. I’ve had a report drawn up and sent to Guy de Marenne, and in it I’ve asked him to make a direct appeal to the King. If we’re fortunate, the case will be heard by the King himself when he stops here between Wales and Westminster.’

Alfric winced. If Thomas were to be put on trial while the King was in residence at the castle, the whole of Christendom would hear of it. Had it been wise, he wondered, to make a deal with the chancellor? The reputation of the Franciscan order could hardly escape being tarnished, and for what? To keep the peace on the streets of Oxford, and to remove the suspicion of murder from the Jews, whom everyone believed slaughtered babies and sacrificed virgins anyway.

That was an unchristian thought for a holy man, he realised. There really was no choice.

‘I’m sure the lady Matilda will write to her nephew, too,’

the chancellor said. ‘And I’ll encourage her to write in support of our plan.’

‘Your plan,’ Alfric pointed out. But there was no more to be said. The grey-bearded rabbi stepped forward. If he thanks us again, Alfric thought, I’ll brain him with my cross. Why can’t they just be Christians, like everyone else?

‘Chancellor,’ the rabbi said, hesitantly, ‘there is one thing I would ask. If there is anything you can do to help us, we would be eternally grateful. Could we perhaps be permitted to open our shops and workrooms again, just for one day each week? We must be allowed to make a living, surely?’

The chancellor shook his head. ‘It’s out of my hands,’ he said. ‘It’s a matter of law. There’s nothing I can do. And,’ he added, ‘I should keep your people off the streets while the King and the court are in town. Edward Plantagenet is very keen on being seen as a Christian king, and he’s only too happy to spill blood to prove it.’

‘Thank you, chancellor,’ the rabbi said, and retreated into the shadows.

The door of brother Roger’s cell was open. Through the doorway

Alfric could see the old man, sitting on his bed as usual, and the Doctor sitting beside him on a chair. They were engaged in conversation.

Alfric stooped to pass under the lintel, and the two men looked up.

‘Alfric!’ the Doctor said. ‘Have you transcribed brother Thomas’s confession?’

‘Yes Doctor. It’s all here.’ Alfric waved a sheaf of papers.

‘Although he won’t answer to his name. He won’t budge from his tale of being possessed by an evil spirit.’

‘Did he implicate me?’ brother Roger asked. ‘If he said I had anything to do with the murders, he’s a liar.’

‘Don’t worry, brother. Thomas claims he did everything himself. Although of course he blames everything on the voices in his head. You, brother Roger,’ Alfric added with a smile that he couldn’t repress, ‘were merely his innocent, unsuspecting dupe.’

The old teacher didn’t respond angrily, as Alfric had expected, but merely gave him an enigmatic stare.

‘And it was all for this,’ the Doctor said, placing his hand on the manuscript pages that were spread across the friar’s blankets. ‘Why did Thomas want it so badly? What was the source of his obsession? I suspect we’ll never know.’

‘Not unless you believe in demons,’ Alfric said. ‘And I don’t.’

‘Nor do I, brother Alfric,’ the Doctor said. ‘But I’ve seen some strange things on my travels. I wonder whether Thomas was being manipulated. Brother Roger says he was a simple lad when he first came to the friary, and he seems to have reverted to that type. Yet while he was hearing voices, he was clever and glib. Don’t you think it’s rather odd?’

Alfric grunted. He mistrusted everything brother Thomas had told him, but he didn’t want to become involved in a debate with the Doctor.

The Doctor grinned, and turned to face brother Roger.

‘I’m sorry your observatory was destroyed,’ he said. ‘Before we had to

run for our lives from the flames, I had a good look round. You had a remarkably fine library, and some of your work was, believe me, hundreds of years ahead of its time.'

Brother Roger flapped his hands. 'Oh, none of it matters, Doctor. I'd long since ceased to work there. I was content to let the place and everything in it rot. I would never have returned to work there, had it not been for Thomas. And all my best ideas are still in here.' He tapped the side of his head with a bony finger.

Alfric stepped to the bed and picked up a handful of papers. 'I'm afraid I must send this to the minister-general, brother. You have wilfully disobeyed the rules of the order and the direct instructions of the minister. I'll make sure the minister-general knows you were acting under duress.' Alfric had a heavy heart: it seemed cruel to subject the old teacher to the discipline of the order, when he had already suffered Thomas's bullying and the loss of his old observatory. But Alfric could not avoid his duties as proctor.

'That won't be necessary,' brother Roger said. He took the pages from Alfric's hand and offered instead two sheets of paper. 'I have written a confession.'

Alfric scanned the closely written lines of Latin script. It was, indeed, a complete account of brother Roger's wrongdoings, although much of the text consisted of justifications, excuses, appeals for clemency, and barbed comments about the Franciscans' attitude to the study of natural philosophy.

'This will suffice,' Alfric said. 'But I don't understand why you want to keep the manuscript. The minister-general will certainly never allow you to publish it.'

'Publish it?' Brother Roger began to laugh, cackling so hard that he started to cough. 'You misunderstand, brother. I have something else in mind. Doctor, would you bring me one of the candles from the table?'

'With pleasure,' the Doctor said, and moved with such alacrity that Alfric suspected that he and brother Roger had concocted the scheme while they had been alone together.

Brother Roger, holding the candle, stood at the window.

The Doctor passed the manuscript to him, one page at a time.

And brother Roger carefully set fire to each page, and watched it flame, before tossing it away.

‘The Elixir of Life,’ Alfric protested. ‘Even though the work is unfinished, it is a considerable -’

‘It is a considerable pile of excrement,’ brother Roger declared. ‘Look at it. Page after page of nonsense. Bits of alchemy, bits of astrology, bits of gibberish I made up. You think Thomas duped me, proctor? Well, I duped him. This manuscript is worth less than the ink I used to write it. And it gives me much pleasure to see it turn to ash.’

‘It’s for the best, Alfric,’ the Doctor said. ‘I predict that brother Roger will be remembered, generations from now, as a teacher and philosopher. This manuscript would do his reputation no good at all, believe me.’

Half the pages had been turned to smoke and dust, and brother Roger was still methodically burning page after page.

‘There can be no Elixir of Life,’ he said. ‘Or none that mortal men can devise. I told Thomas it was impossible. He had heard, I don’t know how, as he was no scholar, that in some of my early writings I discussed the possibility of creating such a thing. And, indeed, there are such passages in my books. I have a discursive style. At first I refused to even talk about the subject. Then I took pity on his obsession, and to humour him I pretended to start work on the project. And then I was trapped: he wouldn’t let me stop.’

The Doctor seemed transfixed by the flickering of the flames as they devoured the fruits of brother Roger’s enforced labours. ‘It’s ironic,’ he said. ‘This manuscript was the one thing that Thomas wanted. It was, until brother Roger wrote his confession, the one piece of evidence the minister needed to be sure that he could control his most gifted but most troublesome friar. It was the one thing, of all the wonderful books and devices and writings, that escaped the fire at the observatory. And it’s complete and utter nonsense.’

The final page, aflame, was carried away by the breeze outside the window. With a bow, brother Roger returned the candle to the Doctor. He seemed, Alfric thought, to have lost ten years of his age. His cheeks were ruddy, instead of grey, and he held himself upright.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ brother Roger said, ‘for everything.’

I’m free of that cursed Elixir at last. I have no doubt that you are

correct in assuming I will be remembered beyond my time.

And now I can be sure that I will not be infamous as the progenitor of errors and superstition.'

Alfric thought he had to intervene. 'I don't want to dash your hopes, brother,' he said, 'but this confession of yours will ensure that the order will keep you immured and silenced, perhaps for the rest of your days.'

Brother Roger gave him a sidelong look. 'That's what you think, brother,' he said.

Matilda had said Nyssa was welcome to stay at her manor of Lechwell. The house was newly built, of fine stone, and although it had a moat and a surrounding wall it was, according to Matilda, as unlike a castle as a manor house could be. And although the private grounds were extensive, little had yet been done to cultivate them. Creating a garden there could be Nyssa's task and recreation.

Nyssa knew she meant well. Matilda thought she must have been shocked by the mad friar's murderous attack. There seemed to her to be no other explanation for Nyssa's air of distraction, and Nyssa knew it would be impossible to explain it to her.

The castle was, it was true, a constant reminder of the crimes that had been committed there and in the town beyond its walls. Nyssa couldn't climb the stairs of the keep without remembering Richard's blood, pulsing from his body and flowing across the floor of the belvedere room. She couldn't sit in the garden without glancing, again and again, towards the rose-covered bower in which she had almost surrendered her life.

But the castle was just a building. The garden was just an arrangement of paths and lawns and flowerbeds and trees. The ramparts and towers didn't seem threatening. She had felt little emotion when she found Richard dying, or when the friar had chased her and caught her, and so the places where those events occurred were not redolent of memories or feelings.

She was preoccupied, now, with trying to analyse her reactions. Why had she been prepared to allow the friar to take her life? And why, at the last second, had she resisted?

And so she sat under one of the young chestnut trees in the garden, deep in thought, reaching conclusions, refusing Matilda's kind offers

of company and diversion, and waiting for the Doctor.

He came for her in the afternoon. He stopped in the shadow of the gatehouse towers as he looked across the garden. She lifted an arm, he saw her, and he began to walk slowly towards her.

She had known two versions of the Doctor and this, the earlier, she had always thought of as the less sensitive and understanding. She therefore expected nothing more from him than a cheerful announcement that it was time to leave. She had been rehearsing several different replies, and she still hadn't decided which to use.

It came as a surprise when he stopped in front of her, wrung his hands, opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, and sat down cross-legged beside her.

'I really am most awfully sorry,' he said. His eyes were so wide with concern that his face looked comical, and she had to smile. 'I shouldn't have placed you in a position where you were obliged to defend yourself with a knife. I don't make a habit of endangering the lives of my travelling companions, you know.'

Nyssa knew that was entirely untrue, but she replied with only a sceptical look.

'And I'm afraid I've some bad news,' the Doctor went on, 'about your thesis.'

The thesis. Nyssa had forgotten all about it. Her discovery of Roger Bacon, the proto-scientist. The thesis that would make her name as a technographic historian.

She found, to her surprise, that her curiosity was piqued.

She told herself her researches were irrelevant now, but she couldn't help wanting to know the Doctor's news, bad or otherwise.

'Did Thomas kill him?' she asked.

'Who?' the Doctor said. 'Oh, Roger Bacon. No, he's still very much with us. Which is more than can be said for everything he's worked on or written during the last twenty years.'

Then the Doctor told her what he had been doing in the days since they had arrived in Oxford, and how Roger Bacon's most recent work

had become the cause of a trail of deception, theft and murder.

Nyssa guessed the Doctor wasn't telling her everything.

He didn't dwell on the deaths, and Nyssa could only speculate about the reason for Thomas's obsession with the Elixir of Life.

'But the Elixir manuscript has been destroyed,' Nyssa said after the Doctor had completed his account, and they had both stared in silence at the garden for a while. 'So Bacon won't be known for that.'

'That's correct,' the Doctor said. 'And to that extent we've prevented a substantial distortion in the time-stream. But he won't be remembered, either, as the inventor of the submarine, the discoverer of gravity, and the astronomer who described the solar system before Galileo and Copernicus. All that's left are his reputation as a teacher and the books he wrote before he joined the friars: good, solid, pioneering work, all of it, on optics and lenses, and very scientific for this era. And even these early writings touch on novelties such as gunpowder and the movement of the planets.'

'But?' Nyssa said. 'I mean, his surviving work is based on the principle of experimentation, isn't it? He is still the earliest true scientist and, as he's virtually unknown to technographers in my era, that makes him a suitable subject for a thesis.'

The Doctor looked mournful, and shook his head. 'I read his books last night,' he said. '*De multiplicatione spectrum* and *De speculis comburentibus*, his earliest works, and the *Opus maius* and the *Opus minor* that he sent secretly to the Pope after he joined the Franciscans. And the science in them is almost incidental. His philosophy isn't at all forward-thinking, I'm afraid. His main objective is to prepare the Christian world for the coming of the Antichrist, which he believes is imminent. He thinks that, in order to be ready for the conflict, true Christians need to be aware of the fundamental nature of the physical world. Which is all well and good, but he believes the universe is governed by the idea of the self-generation of likenesses. In other words, everything

– from physical objects to abstract concepts – reproduces and emanates exact copies of itself. He has studied optics because light is, he believes, the most nearly divine essence in the physical world. And, of course, it's one of the few things that behaves in the way he thinks everything else does. His scientific discoveries are merely by-products of his theological and philosophical theories. I'm sorry, Nyssa, but I

don't think he is, after all, a scientist. There's not enough in the writings that have survived to warrant the argument of your thesis. And what science there is, is buried so deeply in his texts that it's unlikely to have any effect on the technological advancement of this time.'

Nyssa shrugged. She hadn't intended to return to her researches, anyway. And, as she looked around her at the stone walls and tall towers of the castle bailey, she shuddered as she imagined them crashing down under the onslaught of missiles fired by gunpowder. 'Perhaps that's just as well,' she said. 'These people aren't ready for an industrial revolution.'

But at least Bacon's wrong about the end of the world being imminent, too.'

She saw the look on the Doctor's face. 'He is wrong about that, isn't he, Doctor?'

'It won't be the end of the world,' the Doctor said. 'Not in the way Roger Bacon expects. But I'm afraid things are due to get rather unpleasant, at least on this continent. The people here are in for fifty years of poor harvests, followed by a virulent plague that will depopulate large areas. Towns, like this one, will be particularly badly affected. Civilisation will survive, but it will be three hundred years before the population recovers to the level it is now.'

Nyssa stared blankly at the garden around her. The sky was blue, the sunlight was warm, the roses were in bloom. It seemed impossible to believe it wouldn't go on for ever.

'He thought he loved me,' she said.

'Who? Roger Bacon?'

'Richard. The chancellor's knight. I suppose I caused him to be killed, in a way. He wouldn't have stayed here, in the castle, if I hadn't been here. And he would have been in his armour, anyway. He was writing a letter to me. He was alone in the belevedere, thinking about love, when Thomas found him. He didn't even have his sword.'

'You can't blame yourself,' the Doctor said. 'You've travelled with me. You know there's no point in trying to work out what might have been.'

'I know. And anyway, I didn't care, at the time. Was it only yesterday?'

It seems much longer ago. It's ironic, isn't it?

I was so determined that nothing unpleasant would intrude into my life that I wouldn't let myself react even to Richard's death. And now you tell me it was all futile: there's death and plague coming here. I thought I could retreat into this garden, and that nothing could reach me here. But there's no escape.'

The Doctor smiled, but his eyes were as hard and bright as diamonds. 'No, there's no escape. Events happen, wherever you are. Even a Time Lord has to face up to them. The only way out, in the end, is to stop living.'

'At least you have several chances,' Nyssa pointed out.

'And the people of this time believe in a second life, after death. I don't have regeneration or an afterlife to look forward to. And you're right, of course: the only way out of the troubles of the world is to stop living. And I was ready for that, when Thomas came for me with the knife. I welcomed it.'

'What?' The Doctor stared at her. 'What do you mean?'

'I wouldn't have minded,' Nyssa said. 'I had become so tired of dealing with everything. I knew he was going to kill me, and I didn't mind.'

'Good heavens. I had no idea. But you defended yourself.

You found the knife and you struck your attacker. Survival instinct, I suppose. Thank goodness for our instinctive reactions.'

'It wasn't instinctive,' Nyssa insisted. 'Why couldn't he understand? You'll find out, Doctor, when you meet me and take me aboard the TARDIS, that I do very little from instinct.

I'm a trained scientist, and I like to be in control of myself at all times.'

'So if you didn't defend yourself automatically,' the Doctor asked cautiously, 'what motivated you?'

Nyssa took a deep breath. 'I had to make a decision very quickly,' she said. 'There wasn't time to consider complex arguments. I had to decide simply whether I wanted to die, or to try to continue to live.'

'To exist or not to exist,' the Doctor said. 'That is the question. I gave

Shakespeare that line, you know. But he changed it. Ungrateful fellow.'

'We still know of his plays,' Nyssa said, 'even in my era.

But only in translation. Anyway, I made a decision: better anything than nothing. Even if the anything is injury, or unhappiness, or anxiety, or fear. It's still better than nothing.

So I used the knife.'

'I see,' the Doctor said. Nyssa could see he was choosing his words carefully, and that he didn't know how to proceed.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I know I made the correct decision. How is Thomas?'

The Doctor seemed relieved that she had changed the subject. 'He's recovered consciousness,' he said, 'and he seems to have reverted to the rather slow-witted youth that he was when brother Roger took him in. He says everything he did was at the prompting of the voices in his head. We'll probably never know why he was so obsessed with the Elixir of Life.'

The Elixir of Life. Suddenly it seemed to Nyssa an absurd expression. It was impossible, tautological. Life itself was the elixir.

'What will you do now?' the Doctor said. This, Nyssa presumed, was the question he had been reluctant to ask. She knew that he felt responsible for the people he plucked from their own time and whisked hither and thither in time and space. She knew also that he wouldn't want to keep her with him, for the same reasons that he hadn't wanted her to come with him in the first place: their asynchronous contact was an anomaly in both of their time-lines, and he would want to return her to her own place and time. And no doubt he feared that she would refuse to go.

'I told you not to worry, Doctor,' she said. 'I've got students to teach, a head of department to fend off, or to flirt with, a war to prepare for, and a thesis to delete. You can take me home.'

'Excellent!' the Doctor declared. 'And don't worry: when I meet your younger self, I'll remember not to recognise you.'

Nyssa had a sudden thought. Her hand flew to her mouth to suppress a burst of laughter. 'I've just realised,' she said,

‘that now you’ve met the older me, you’ll have to take particular care to keep the younger me alive.’

‘Not at all,’ the Doctor protested. ‘Having seen your older self, I know I can confidently pay no attention whatsoever to protecting your younger self from harm.’

Nyssa had learnt enough about temporal physics to know the Doctor was wrong. And she knew that, beneath his buffoonery, he knew it too. His arrival in her Home had created an immutable island in the time-stream, and he would have to strive continuously to ensure that his future and her past led inexorably to this moment in which they were sitting together beneath a chestnut tree in thirteenth-century Oxford.

‘Anyway,’ the Doctor went on, ‘I don’t make a habit of letting my companions die.’ As he said the words Nyssa saw a frown of pain momentarily crease his brow. A memory? A premonition? For a Time Lord, she thought, remembrance and foresight are almost the same thing. When you’ve lived several long lifetimes, can you be sure which of your memories are of things past, and which are of things yet to be?

The Doctor and Nyssa sat together in silence for a while.

Then the Doctor sighed, and spoke. ‘On the subject of dealing with the troubles of life,’ he said, ‘I once was told a story that might be apposite. Two men were discussing their different ways of coping with life’s difficulties. One said that he regarded himself as responsible for everything that occurred, and that he deliberated over every action that he took. The other was amazed. “How can you live like that?” he said. “I take the opposite view. I don’t care about anything, and I go through life discarding responsibilities. How can you bear to carry the whole world on your shoulders?” And the first man said, “The world? Are you referring to that ball of earth I’m dancing on?”’

Nyssa smiled and nodded. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That’s exactly it.’ She held out her arms: she felt as though she wanted to embrace the universe. She was so happy that she didn’t know whether to laugh or to weep. ‘I had to choose, and I chose to live. It’s a wonderful feeling, and I’ll never forget it. I’m going to choose to live every minute of every day.’

She watched two of the gardeners, on their knees, pulling weeds from the soil of a flowerbed. ‘Matilda was right,’ she said. ‘This garden isn’t real unless there are courtiers to stroll along the avenues, and knights

in the tilt-yard competing for a lady's hand. She'll be disappointed when I tell her I'm leaving. But she won't be surprised.'

'She'll have some consolation,' the Doctor said. 'The chancellor told me this morning that the King intends to stop here on his way back from Wales, as soon as the campaign ends. He's sure to stay here.'

'I just hope he approves of Matilda's taste in garden design,' Nyssa said. She pictured the paths and lawns crowded with noblemen, ladies, knights, horses, servants and soldiers.

'She'll find that when the visitors arrive they'll bring trouble and discord with them. People always do. The garden's truly peaceful only when it's empty. And that's the peace of the grave.'

The Doctor stood up. 'We should be getting back to the TARDIS,' he said. 'It's a long walk.'

Nyssa jumped to her feet. She brushed grass cuttings from the stiff folds of her robe. 'I don't care,' she said, and laughed.

'I'll be dancing.'

Epilogue

He noticed that it was raining again. How long had he been here, with his back resting against the warm wall of the module? The temple. The place that a small part of him had once thought of as home.

The gloomy day was darkening into night, with no intervening dusk. Just a gradual fading of the light, a lowering of the blanket of cloud, a capricious swirling of the relentless wind.

His habit, soaked and cold, stuck to his body, and he was shivering. He was sure he would know if the one he was looking for was close by. And he felt nothing.

A chasm of despair opened in his mind. Had he arrived too late? Had the one he sought already gone? He had survived for so many years, and had travelled so many miles, and had been drawn here at last, to this place that he recognised, and at this time. It couldn't be for nothing.

But nothing was what he sensed around him. He put his shaking fingers to the indentation in his temple, and he felt the hard point of metal embedded in his skull. It was as cold as the rain that dripped

from his hood.

Desolate hopelessness overwhelmed him, and he almost fell. When he put his hand against the wall to support himself the surface was warm but he heard no voices from within the temple. No voices in his head. No tremor of warmth from the splinter of metal in his skull. Perhaps the demon, trapped for so many years in the shard, was dead at last.

‘You can’t stay here, old man,’ a voice said. ‘You’ll catch your death. Come with us.’

He felt a hand on his arm, and tried to shrug it off.

‘You’re shaking with the ague,’ the voice said. ‘Have you been out in the rain all day?’

He managed to turn. He saw three robed figures.

Hospitallers, by their habits.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Must preach. Must right the wrongs I’ve done. Then, afterwards, back to the hospital. And then I can rest in peace.’

‘I believe he’s a Franciscan,’ one of the hospitallers said.

‘Look, he’s wearing a grey habit.’

He barked a laugh, which turned into a cough. ‘They let me keep it,’ he said. ‘Must preach. It’s the rule of our founder.’ He took a step away from the hospitallers, and then another. ‘Many sins to atone for. So many sins.’

They let him go. He wandered aimlessly across the paddock. There were lights flickering behind the shutters of the hospital, and torches burning in the vaulted tunnel of the city’s Old Gate. The wind blew rain against his back and impelled him forward, towards the city walls, wet-black, and the guttering torch flames. He passed carts, axle-deep in watery ruts, with stoical, thin-flanked, rain-drenched oxen between the shafts. His feet sank up to the ankles into mud.

The tunnel beneath the towers of the gate was so crowded that there was barely room for anyone to pass into or out of the city. Labourers, street traders, prostitutes and beggars were sheltering from the weather, waiting in the gateway in the thin hope that the rain might ease before the soldiers pushed them out and shut the gates for the night. Some people had miles to walk, carrying their unsold wares or

herding their animals, into the countryside of Essex. They stood silently, like an assembly of pale wraiths, staring towards the darkening sky in the east.

He didn't preach every day. But he preached whenever he remembered to. Unlike prayer, it didn't seem entirely futile.

'I have sinned!' he announced. His voice was weak and thready, but it echoed along the stone vaulting. Some in the crowd groaned or murmured in protest.

'I have done deeds so black that they swallow all the sins that you have done. I have done murder. I have killed men.'

Now there was silence, until someone shouted, 'You, old man? You're too frail to crack an egg.'

A few laughed at that. 'I could do with a few more sinners,' a woman shouted. 'There's precious little trade on the streets these days.'

'And I'll bet you'd swallow their sins, and all, wouldn't you?'

'Just so long as they pay,' the woman replied, among the laughter and jeers.

They weren't listening to him. He could be patient. He had become used to being ignored. He waited until the ribald comments petered out. 'I was possessed by a demon,' he said.

'It spoke to me. It told me what to do.'

'A likely story!' someone called out. Others drew back from him, as much as they could in the confined space, as if they feared that the demon would leap from his mouth.

A guard appeared at the end of the corridor. His metal cap and the blade of his pike gleamed wetly in the dying light.

'Get going, you lot!' he shouted. 'I'm going to close the gates.'

The rain's eased off a bit.'

There were exclamations of protest and derision, and no one moved.

'I'm going to close the gates,' the guard repeated. 'You'll all have to shift. And keep the noise down, anyway. You! Yes, you. Old friar. Why don't you pray for the rain to stop, instead of making a nuisance of

yourself?’

He remembered sunshine. He had been a boy, once. Such a long time ago. And it seemed as if the sun had shone every day.

‘There’s a storm coming,’ he shouted.

‘That’s comforting,’ someone said sarcastically. ‘Now tell us something we don’t know.’

‘A storm,’ he repeated. ‘A terrible storm.’ But it wasn’t to be a storm. Not more bad weather. Something else. He couldn’t remember. But he had known once. The voices had known about it. A dreadful calamity, spreading through the towns and across the countryside. He wouldn’t live to see it.

But then, he had lived so long. Everyone he had known had died. He had seen floods, and fields of barley flattened and ruined by unseasonal rain. He had seen carts laden with dead and bleeding soldiers coming from the wars. But something else was coming. Something worse than flood, famine and war. But he couldn’t remember.

He put his hand to his head, and touched his old wound.

His fingertip felt warmth, and a tremor. What little remained of the demon was still alive, then.

And suddenly he sensed it: the one he was looking for was close. A stab of pain seared through his temples, and he staggered. He leant on his staff, and pulled himself upright, and he saw them: three figures, young men, pushing into the crowd at the city end of the tunnel, keeping their heads down even though they were now out of the rain, making their way towards him.

They were close now. He could see nothing to mark them out from the rest of the crowd: they were thin, and one was lame. Their tunics were patched and threadbare. Their shoes were caked with mud and filth. But some in the crowd noticed them and muttered insults as they passed. He heard the sounds of hawking and spitting.

Which one? Not the one limping on a twisted leg. One of the other two. That one. He extended his shaking arm and placed his staff as firmly as he could in their path.

‘I must tell you,’ he said. ‘You. You’re the one.’ His fingers clawed at

the young man's sleeve. 'I must tell you.'

The young man lifted his head. His eyes blazed in the gloom. 'Let go of me,' he whispered urgently.

One of the young man's companions spoke to him.

He couldn't understand the words, but the sound seemed familiar.

'Use the natives' language,' the young man hissed. 'Do you want to get us killed?'

'What's going on down there?' the guard shouted from the mouth of the gateway. 'Is that mad old friar blocking the tunnel?'

More of the crowd turned to look at the three men. There were muted shouts and jeers. 'Bloody foreigners. Go back to where you came from. Not enough work here for the rest of us. Bastards. Scum. Filth.'

'Listen to me,' he said. He heard his voice quaking and cracking. He held on to the young man's arm with all the strength his thin and trembling hand could muster. 'There's no sanctuary. The more you seek it, the less you'll find. It will lead you into sin. Listen, there's more.'

'We cannot remain here,' the young man said to his companions. 'The natives are surrounding us.'

The young man wasn't listening. Yet he must listen. This was important. He must be warned. He must be told that his journey would be useless. 'See this?' he said, pointing to the scar at his temple. 'This is where it will end. You cannot find what you're looking for. All you will find is death.'

'Cease talking to me!' the young man whispered, and pulled his arm away. 'Let us leave this place and return immediately to the module,' he said to his companions. 'I must prepare for the transfer. These people are becoming more hostile.'

'Wait!' he cried. 'Listen!'

'Leave us alone,' the young man said. 'Your words are meaningless.'

The three pushed on towards the end of the tunnel. The crowd pressed against them, jostling and kicking and muttering obscenities and curses. The young men stumbled out of the gateway and ran into the

rain and the darkness.

‘Stop!’ he shouted ‘Wait! I must warn you.’

‘It’s no good trying to reason with the likes of them,’

someone said to him. ‘They’re different from normal people.

Let them go to hell in their own way, brother friar. It’s not worth trying to save them. Not when there are Christian folk who need your prayers.’

‘Prayers?’ he said. His life was over. He had wandered for years, for miles, a lifetime, searching, waiting for this meeting.

Now it was over. ‘I can’t pray. Not any more.’

He felt nothing.

‘Right! That’s it!’ the guard shouted. ‘I’m shutting the gates. Clear off home, the whole lot of you.’

The crowd shuffled unwillingly towards the end of the tunnel. He was carried along with it. Then, cold drizzle on his head. Cold mud around his feet. Darkness in all directions.

Hardly a light showing. The slam of the gates behind him.

‘Are you all right, brother friar? Where are you heading for?’

‘Home,’ he said. He didn’t bother to look up to see who was speaking to him. He could feel drops of water running down his face, and he realised he was weeping. Why wouldn’t the young man listen to him? ‘I’m going home.’

He dragged his feet from the mud and set off into the night.

Rats, made reckless by their hunger, squealed angrily at him as he passed.

Acknowledgements and bibliography

My thanks go to Philip Morgan, who suggested most of the books (the serious history ones) in the list below. Any errors contained in *Asylum* are nothing to do with him or the books he recommended, but are entirely my responsibility.

Thanks also to Southampton's splendid public library service, which efficiently found the books for me and provided a quiet, comfortable reference library in which I took notes.

Anyone who argues against the notion that private wealth should be taxed in order to make public provision deserves to be soundly kicked.

The books I consulted before and during the writing of *Asylum* are as follows.

The Victoria History of the Counties of England: A History of the County of Oxford

Volume 2, edited by William Page, published by Archibald Constable & Co Ltd, 1907

Volume 4, edited by Alan Crossley, published by Oxford University Press, 1979.

Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c1200-1520 by Christopher Dyer, published by Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts 1086-1348 by Edward Miller and John Hatcher, published by Longman, 1995.

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Lindberg, published by Oxford University Press, 1983.

Doctor Who: The Handbook: The Fourth Doctor by David J. Howe, Mark Stammers and Stephen James Walker, published by Virgin Publishing Ltd, 1992.

Doctor Who - Companions by David J. Howe and Mark Stammers, published by Virgin Publishing Ltd, 1995.

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respectively.

A History of Errors and Falsifications

'Anything but history, for history must be false.'

Sir Robert Walpole

I thought you, readers, might like to know how much of *Asylum* is historically true and how much is my invention.

And I thought it would be a simple subject to deal with: a page or two, perhaps. But the more I considered the question, the more difficulties I could see in answering it. And so this note will inevitably prove to be more an essay than a brief note.

It's well known that Henry Ford, originator of the Ford Motor Company and pioneer of industrial mass-production, said: 'History is bunk.' Less well known is that in the eighteenth century Voltaire had already decided that '*Toutes les histoires anciennes ne sont que les fables convenues*'.

There's a pretty general consensus that history, whether handed down orally from generation to generation or written up in a textbook with a multitude of footnotes, is unreliable.

The surprising thing is that you won't find many historians prepared to refute this proposition. Historians are more aware than most people that each generation rewrites history from its own viewpoint. As an example, let's consider the treatment of the reign of Elizabeth I. When I was at university (in the Pre-Cambrian Era) the old orthodoxy – that Good Queen Bess was a leader of Churchillian stature who, through her wisdom, courage and statesmanship, guided England to a moderate religious settlement, away from foreign wars and in a direction that led finally to the British Empire – was being challenged by theories that she was indecisive and reckless and that she survived on the throne only through some remarkably good luck. It was therefore interesting to see, on Simon Schama's recent BBC television series, that this new orthodoxy is being questioned in its turn, and that Elizabeth is once again being given the credit for England remaining independent and, by willing the succession to James VI of Scotland, for laying the foundations for the rise of Britain as the pre-eminent world power.

It would wrong, however, to conclude that nothing written in history books is to be believed, and that every opinion about the past is equally valid. Relativism is one of the curses of our times (I blame Wittgenstein, to some extent), and every thinking person should resist its baleful influence. It is true that all statements should be treated with scepticism; equally, some statements are more trustworthy than others. A book about the reign of Elizabeth written by an academic

who has spent his career inspecting the source documents and the latest research may not be the whole truth, but it will be more reliable than an article written by a journalist, for instance, who has a passing interest in the subject and a deadline to meet, and more reliable still than the opinion of a bloke you meet on the bus.

And recent history books, all other things being equal, are more likely to be trustworthy than old ones, simply because research never stops, and previously unknown documents and archaeological remains are always being unearthed.

I therefore don't lose much sleep over the innate unreliability of history. In the same way that science observes phenomena, and then sets up testable hypotheses to explain them, thus building up a picture, by definition always incomplete, of how the universe works, so history scratches around for facts and attempts to fit them into the jigsaw puzzle that is the picture of the past. And, just as I'd rather trust science than mysticism or blind faith to explain the universe, I'd rather trust historians than poets, politicians or priests to tell me about the past.

If you're with me so far, and you're prepared to agree that the view, however incomplete, of the past provided by modern academic historians is the best we're likely to get, we can start to consider the particular problems caused by writing fiction in a real historical setting.

When I sat down to list the problems of writing historical fiction, I realised that in fact they apply, almost without alteration, to the writing of fiction in any real setting – other, perhaps, than the place and time in which the author lives.

(There is, it occurs to me, another essay to be written about the similarity between time-travelling in the TARDIS and writing fiction, but this is neither the time nor the place for it.) I've written, and had published, twelve novels in various genres. But *Asylum* is the first that I've set in a real time and place. I found myself having to consider questions such as: how did a noblewoman address a knight? And I started to wish that I'd set the book in present-day Oxford, rather than the Oxford of 600 years ago.

I realised, though, that present-day Oxford would have presented me with almost as many difficulties. I haven't been there for years, so I would have been dependent on maps and reference books, just as I was for thirteenth-century Oxford.

Maps don't show the very latest changes; reference books leave out the really useful facts – the facts you can know only if you live and work in a place. Whether the story is set in the present or the past, in a city seventy miles away or 7,000, no book or map can tell me the colour of the sky at dawn, the locations of the bars that serve drinks all night, the smell of the street where the fast-food shops are.

I guess that's why they call it fiction: whether the setting is imaginary or supposedly factual, in fact the whole thing is unreal.

That's as it should be. A novelist, after all, is seeking to describe truth, not reality.

Writing a story in a historical setting does, in fact, throw up more difficulties. Just as with a contemporary setting, there is too much information: there are so many books and maps and web sites that you could spend the rest of your life researching, and still not know everything about your chosen location, past or present. But history is, inevitably, incomplete.

There are large areas of the jigsaw where the pieces are simply missing, and you haven't got time to study the whole picture in detail anyway.

Having been commissioned to write *Asylum* on the basis of a confident synopsis, the more reading I did, and the more I realised how much I didn't and couldn't know, the greater grew the trepidation with which I approached the task of writing.

There can be, it seems to me, four levels of falsehood in a historical novel. And, again, I can't help thinking that they apply to any novel that purports to have a real setting.

There is the deliberate altering of generally agreed facts. A recent, infamous example of this is the movie *U571*, in which American seamen board a German submarine during the Second World War and discover a decoding machine that helps the Allies to win the war. Except, of course, the machine was actually found by British seamen; the USA hadn't even entered the war at the time the incident occurred. This kind of thing is I think acceptable if the story is clearly a fantasy: there are plenty of alternative-history novels that include real people doing and saying things they never did in reality. It's unacceptable in a story that purports to be, or even appears to be, a factual account. In the writing of *Asylum* I chose not to include anything that contradicted any historical facts that I knew of.

On the other hand, I made liberal use of the second level of falsehood: the deliberate invention of facts and people to fill historical gaps. For instance, I was unable to find a list of the ministers who had been in charge of the Franciscan friary in Oxford. I therefore had no hesitation in making up the character of brother Hubert to fill the vacancy.

And no doubt I'm guilty of many, many instances of the third level of falsehood: the insertion of errors and anachronisms through ignorance, because it's impossible ever to research any setting completely. It is entirely possible that somewhere, in a book I haven't read, there is a description of Oxford Castle as it was at the end of the 1270s – and, if such a description exists, I'm willing to bet it doesn't bear much resemblance to the castle as I've portrayed it.

All of the three types of falsehood described above are concerned with details and facts, people and places. Too many of them in a story turn it from a historical novel into something else: a picaresque fantasy, or no kind of novel at all. They are insignificant, however, compared with the fourth type of falsehood.

My favourite saying about history comes from the introduction to L P Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*. (No, I haven't read it, either. But it's in the movie, too.) 'The past is a foreign country,' he says. 'They do things differently there.'

That's a profound insight, but I think it doesn't go far enough. The past, it seems to me, is more foreign and unknowable than any place in our contemporary, mass-communications, global-economy, homogenous world.

It is of course true that humankind hasn't changed since the modern form of *Homo sapiens* evolved in Africa about 100,000 years ago. If you could bring one of those Stone Age babies forward in time, and bring him up in Dorking or Dusseldorf or Detroit or Dakkar, he'd look no different from anyone else, he'd speak the language of his adoptive parents, and he'd have no more or less difficulty using a computer or driving a car than the rest of us. Throughout not merely recorded history, but also tens of thousands of years of preceding prehistory, human urges, emotions and capabilities have remained unchanged.

Therefore an author writing a historical novel can assume that his characters will be driven by many familiar forces: greed, lust, hunger, pity, duty. But even here the author has to be on his guard: some of the urges that we regard today as natural and inherently human are in fact determined by society. The Romans, for instance, were as

obsessed with cleanliness as we are, but they not only bathed in public, they also had communal toilets. Roman citizens would sit together, gossiping and negotiating business deals, while engaged in what we consider the most private of personal functions. In fact the concept of privacy is a relatively recent invention.

Similarly, while it's impossible to believe that there has ever been a time when people have not felt that combination of affection and desire that we call romantic love, it's also true that ideas such as falling in love and pining for a loved one were medieval innovations. And don't believe all that passionate snogging you see in screen adaptations of Jane Austen novels or the tales of Robin Hood: kissing, as an expression of romantic love, has been going on for only a couple of centuries. There was plenty of kissing before that, but it was done as a sign of respect, friendship or benediction.

All of which goes to show that the past is, indeed, a very foreign country. We can know, with reasonable accuracy, how people built their houses, what they ate, and what they wore.

But how did they think? What were the preconceptions that governed their lives? We can have some idea, but we can never entirely know. And the further back into the past you look, the harder it becomes.

It's difficult to imagine the thought processes and emotions of people living only a hundred years ago. That's the very recent past: three of my four grandparents were alive (although very young) in 1900. We know a great deal about the world they were born into: the level of its technology, the living standards of the population, the structure of households and of the working day. But it isn't easy to cast aside the things that shape our attitudes today – concepts such as leisure, and multiculturalism, and concern for the environment, and gender equality – and reconstruct the mindset of the Edwardians. It goes against our grain to think that white people are innately superior to other races, that Britain is, and deserves to be, the pre-eminent power in the world, that men have control of women, and that the march of progress and civilisation is unstoppable. And yet these were among the accepted, almost entirely unquestioned preconceptions of Edwardian people. And we should not regard them as evil, or stupid, or ignorant. What will our descendants think of our beliefs, a hundred years from now?

A novelist writing a story set in 1900 has, at least, some handholds on the cliff-face of history. There are residues, still, of many of those Edwardian attitudes. There are people still living who remember, and

can describe, what life was like before the First World War. And there is a wealth of documentary evidence that, once researched, allows a writer plentiful insights into how people thought.

But I chose to set my story in the thirteenth century.

The fact that place names and even some buildings survive for centuries gives a misleading impression of continuity.

Carfax, the crossroads at the centre of medieval Oxford, is still there today, still in the same place, still called Carfax. It's tempting to think the surrounding streets and their inhabitants are therefore in some way connected with the medieval town.

They're not. It's an illusion. The people living in England in 1278 have no connection with the population of England today.

If you had a TARDIS, and were to travel back in time to the late thirteenth century, you would find very little that is familiar. Even the climate was a little warmer then than it is now. The wild fauna and flora were much the same, although of course in those days there were wild boar to hunt. The landscape was different: farming was, for the technology of the time, intensive, and areas that we think of as wild and infertile, such as Dartmoor, were cultivated. The countryside was covered with little villages – far more numerous then than now – and between these the land was divided into a complex patchwork of tiny fields and coppiced woods. Towns were few, small, and incredibly crowded within their walls.

The mass of the people spoke dialects of Middle English, which you would find incomprehensible. It must have sounded something like modern Dutch or Low German.

The diet of the people would seem strange, as apart from bread (which was often made from barley or oats rather than wheat), the staple foods were pulses: peas and beans. Many of the foods that we think of as traditionally English – potatoes, tomatoes and turnips, for instance – were unknown.

But if the physical surroundings would seem unfamiliar, the structure of society and the thought processes of the people would be utterly alien. In the thirteenth century the feudal system reached its apogee, and so society was held together by bonds not of class, or money, but of patronage, favours and service obligations that were rooted in landholding.

A typical franklin - a free farmer of the wealthier sort -

might own a few fields, rent others by paying in money or produce, work on other people's, again either for money or for payment in kind, and would probably be required to work on his lord's fields (although some or all of this labour might be replaced by making payments of money or produce). A tenth of the produce of some of these fields would be due to the parish church, or to other religious institutions that owned the land or had the right to the tithes. The franklin would also have certain common rights - to graze animals or to gather wood, for instance. The fields and common lands that he worked could be scattered across a number of villages and parishes.

The landholdings of the nobility, the bishops and the religious houses, which were the largest apart from the lands held directly by the king, were spread over a much larger area, and could include holdings in parts of what is now France, or even other parts of continental Europe. They were also correspondingly more complicated. (I'll give you some idea of the enormous disparity of wealth, which was not considered in any way reprehensible. The king had an annual income of about £30,000; the top earl about £11,000; a baron between

£200 and £500; a knight perhaps £100; and a labourer as little as £2.)

Every individual must have carried in his head a mental map of the landholdings and feudal and church dues of himself and of all of his neighbours. It makes my head hurt just to try to imagine it, although presumably it was second nature to people at the time.

Not surprisingly, medieval England was a litigious place, and there was a complicated hierarchy of courts - church, manorial, forest, sheriff's, royal; to say nothing of the many courts in the towns - whose time was taken up almost entirely with property disputes.

I'm just glad I decided to set *Asylum* in a town rather than in the countryside.

A corollary of the feudal system was that the money economy was less important, to the mass of the people, than the system of interlocking dues and services. There was no small change. A poor labourer might earn tuppence a day -

and the smallest coin was the penny. Therefore most purchases

- a loaf of bread, a few eggs - would be worth far less than the smallest available coin. Imagine what it would be like today if there

was nothing smaller than a £20 note, and you'll get some idea. Everyone must have kept a mental tally of how much they owed, and were owed by others, and there must have been a great deal of bartering of goods and services.

Religion permeated every aspect of everyone's life. Apart from a brief interlude before the successful Anglo-Saxon invaders were converted, England had been a Christian country for 1,000 years. You can forget all that nonsense about Celtic pagan beliefs surviving as an underground movement –

that's a modern invention. Everyone (except the Jews) was Christian, and there was no hint of doubt and not much controversy. The main topic of dispute among theologians was how long it would be before the Second Coming. Some, such as Roger Bacon, were convinced they were living in the last days. The more pragmatic majority were beginning to realise that, if Christ hadn't reappeared in the 1,300 years since his first coming, there was no likelihood that he'd turn up any time soon.

That's just a brief recital of some of the most obvious ways in which thirteenth-century people's lives and beliefs differed from ours. And the vast gulf between medieval and modern poses more than one problem for the author of a historical novel.

There's the straightforward difficulty of trying to place yourself in the heads of your characters, of thinking in their ways. But, in the unlikely event that you might succeed, and that you could begin to think like a medieval person, you then face a second difficulty: if your characters think and act as medieval people would have done, your readers won't have a clue what's going on.

The unsatisfactory solution is to compromise. The characters - friars, merchants, ladies, peasants – have to think, act and speak in ways that a contemporary reader understands.

The author has to create medieval people with anachronistic, updated minds. And this is the fourth type of falsehood. It afflicts all fiction set in a time other than the author's own. It's inevitable and insidious.

Most of the characters in *Asylum* are not typical of their time. Brother Alfric came late to the Franciscan order and I've given him a background in stonemasonry, a very practical and, for its time, forward-looking craft. Matilda, widowed but still young, is an extrovert with a passion for the newfangled idea of courtly love. The

chancellor, Philip of Sea by, comes from a wealthy merchant family, was educated by friars, and governs the university, and therefore has a more wide-ranging and sophisticated view of his society than most. You see what I mean: all of these people are just a little ahead of their time.

But that's what you have to do when writing historical novels. Your viewpoint characters have to think in ways that a present-day readership can empathise with.

And now I'll take a short detour into the subject of viewpoint characters, and on the way try to demolish one of the citadels of political correctness.

You might say: surely, if it's impossible for an author to put himself entirely into the mind of, say, a thirteenth-century friar, then he should not attempt it, as any such attempt will be fraudulent.

This line of reasoning has been much in evidence in several recent literary disputes. Surely, some feminists say, it is inappropriate for a male author to write books with female viewpoint characters, as only a woman can entirely understand what it is to be a woman? Surely, some antiracists argue, it is inappropriate for white-skinned actors to don black make-up and perform as black characters in plays, because only a black-skinned person entirely understands what it is like to be black?

This is a load of cobblers. (Rhyming slang, by the way, from 'cobblers' awls'. Oh, and the rhyming slang for being penniless is 'boracic', from the medical dressing boracic lint, which rhymes with skint, in other words skinned. Can we see no more of this nonsense word 'brassic', please. It doesn't exist.) The fact is that, when you think about it, every work of fiction is a leap into the impossible. Yes, it's not possible for me to place myself entirely in the mind of a thirteenth-century friar, or a woman, or a black person. But it's equally impossible for me to know, entirely, the thought processes and emotions of a minicab driver in Harlow, or a university lecturer in Aberdeen. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this kind of reasoning is that the only permissible writing is first-person narratives about the author's own experiences. And that, by definition, isn't fiction.

Shakespeare was never a medieval prince in Denmark, but he did a fair job of writing *Hamlet*. Come to think of it, he was never a Moorish general in Venice, or a king of Scotland, either, but he managed to throw together *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

Dickens wasn't in Paris during the French Revolution, but *A Tale of Two Cities* remains one of the most gripping accounts of that struggle.

. The point of writing fiction is to tell imaginary stories.

They aren't supposed to be real. If they're written well, they will seem realistic – not because the factual details are correct, but because the readers find it easy to suspend their disbelief.

And that has more to do with creating characters whose actions and thoughts are believable than entirely accurate for their gender, age, class, historical era or political persuasion.

All right, all right. I'll stop the abstract arguments. How much of *Asylum* is real, that's what I promised to tell you.

Let's start with the characters. Apart from Roger Bacon, all the characters who appear in the story are made up.

Conversely, I think it's true that any person who is named in passing – King Edward, for instance, or Aristotle or Bishop Grosseteste – is real.

Although Roger Bacon lived and died in the thirteenth century, I have taken considerable liberties with him. Very little is known about his life, and less about his personality or appearance. Nothing about Bacon in *Asylum* contradicts the historical record; on the other hand, I have filled in some of the gaps with large dollops of pure invention.

Bacon was born in about 1220. It's not known where. He took an MA at Oxford in about 1240, and then went to Paris where he lectured in the university. He returned to teach and study in Oxford in about 1247, and in the next ten years he spent in the region of £2,000 - a vast fortune at the time – on books, instruments and employing assistants. He must have come from a very wealthy family, as his income from teaching could not possibly have funded that level of expenditure.

He joined the Franciscan order in 1257, It is not know why, but, it might have been because he had run out of money.

The grey friars were the most free-thinking and academic of the religious orders, so they would have been his natural choice.

Despite the fact that friars were supposed to devote their lives to poverty, prayer and preaching, and the fact that Franciscans were forbidden to write new texts or to communicate with Rome other than

through their ministers, Bacon seems to have continued his work and his writings, and to have communicated with the Pope, with impunity. While in the Franciscans' Oxford house he wrote *De multiplicatione specterum* and *De speculis comburentibus*. He also travelled: in the 1260s he was back in Paris, writing furiously and in secret-at the behest of his patron Cardinal Guy de Foulques, who in 1265 became pope as Clement IV. Bacon sent the new Pope several works - the *Opus maius* and the *Opus minor* at least. He started on an *Opus tertius*, and by the late 1260s was working on *Communia mathematica*, *Communium naturalium*, and *Compendium studii philosophie*.

The minister-general of the Franciscan order, Jerome of Ascoli, had Bacon imprisoned from about 1278 to 1290. It is not clear what Bacon's crime was, but it's likely his continuing work and writing became too much of an embarrassment to the order. His last known work, *Compendium studii theologie*, was written in about 1292. He is presumed to have died while writing it, aged about seventy-two.

Roger Bacon was known in academic circles throughout the Western Christian world, and so we have to assume he was considered impressively learned. In his writings he argues for deducing conclusions from experimental research, and this has led people to regard him as a forerunner of more modern scientific methods. The fact that his writings contain detailed, accurate work on optics, as well as tantalising phrases that could be taken to refer to telescopes, spectacles, and even more modern technological developments, have only reinforced the view that he was a scientist ahead of his time.

On the other hand, mystics and alchemists have also claimed him as one of their own. It seems that his detailed studies of the planets and stars did nothing to lessen his belief in astrology. He firmly believed that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent, and all of his writings were governed by his urgent desire to arm people with the knowledge they would need to defeat the Antichrist.

The fact is that Roger Bacon was a man of his time. He had a lowering intellect and was a brilliant teacher. He was also deeply religious and superstitious. I've tried to read some of his writings - in English translation, I must add, not in the original Latin - and it seems to me that there is nothing modern, or even forward-looking, in his thinking and his theories. Despite his promotion of empirical research, he seems to have done very little of it himself.

As for his personality: it does seem that he was argumentative and that he treated his fellow academics with the arrogance and rudeness

he felt they deserved.

As you can see, nothing in *Asylum* contradicts the bare facts that are known about Bacon's life. But I have made up a lot, including the existence of his observatory. There was, until the late eighteenth century, a stone building on Folly Bridge over the Thames that was reputed to have been Bacon's observatory, and this legend gave me the idea for the old observatory in which brother Thomas tried to immolate brother Alfric and the Doctor. However, the stone building was never anything to do with Bacon – it was of a much later date – and as it was in the wrong location for the purposes of my story, I invented a small islet on which to place my observatory.

So much for Roger Bacon. What about Oxford?

The volumes of the *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire* were invaluable. They provided two very clear maps of Oxford, and others of the entire county, as well as detailed descriptions. As a result the layout of the town as described in *Asylum*, right down to the street names, is accurate. (My editors at BBC Books can breathe a sigh of relief that I set none of the story in the street that was subsequently renamed Magpie Lane: in medieval times it had a much more forthright name – more coarse even than Shitbarn Lane and Shityard Street, which I also managed to avoid mentioning.)

The walls of medieval Oxford formed an oval, the longer axis of which ran east-west. The walls enclosed most of the land between the river Thames, flowing from the north-west, and the river Cherwell, flowing from the north-east, although it was only beneath the western walls of the castle that the main course of either river flowed close to the town. The castle, a substantial moated fortress, was at the western extremity. There were six gates in the town walls.

Two main roads crossed at Carfax, near the centre of the town. The road from London entered the town at the East Gate, and formed the High Street. Beyond Carfax it became Great Bailey, which name suggests to me that at one time the castle had had an outer bailey that had extended as far as Carfax. At the end of Great Bailey the road turned to the south, around the castle's barbican, which had its own moat, before issuing from the town through the West Gate. Outside the town walls the road curved north again, following the line of the castle's moat, crossed Castle Bridge on to the largest of the many islands that divided the Thames into several streams, and then turned west, over a number of bridges, to become the main road to Faringdon.

The main road from the north, from Woodstock and Banbury, entered the town through the North Gate and was called, imaginatively, Northgate Street until it reached Carfax.

South of Carfax it became Fish Street, and it left the town, heading for Abingdon, through the South Gate.

By the end of the thirteenth century Oxford was crammed with houses and people. The plots of land into which the town had originally been divided had been subdivided over and over again, and houses had been built on plots that we would regard as large enough for a garden shed. Given that there was, of course, no municipal system for delivering clean water or removing sewage, it's not surprising that death rates were high in medieval towns even before the Black Death arrived.

Suburbs had grown up outside the walls, mainly to the north and south, along the roads to Banbury and Abingdon.

There had been a magnificent royal palace just outside the North Gate, but by 1278 it had been leased out and was no longer used as one of the king's residences.

Crafts and trade, and the frequent markets, were concentrated in Northgate Street, Fish Street and the western half of the High Street. Horses were traded outside the north walls, between the North Gate and Smith Gate.

The university quarter was at the eastern end of the town.

Here there were the houses in which the scholars lived, the houses that were rented by teachers to serve as schoolrooms and lecture rooms, and the shops and workplaces of the craftsmen who served the scholars' needs – scribes, paper makers, bookbinders.

The collegiate system had not yet started at the time of *Asylum*. The first college, Merton, was established a few years later. In precollegiate times the students organised themselves, very loosely, into 'nations' – a term that, as far as I can make out, meant almost nothing except 'a grouping of students'. The total student population was between 1,500 and 2,000. They were all male, of course. Some were as young as thirteen, but many were much older. They were mainly the sons of noblemen and wealthy merchants, but as many as a quarter were from the religious houses. However wealthy the patrons, relatives or institutions that paid for their education, the students themselves were poor. They were also young and rowdy, and there

were frequent conflicts between the scholars and the townspeople. Most of the religious houses had their own schools, providing a more elementary education than the university, and many of the university teachers were friars.

The Dominicans and Franciscans were particularly keen on education, and there were many very learned and highly qualified friars, as well as many studying at the university.

Although there were as yet no colleges, the university had a central administration headed by the chancellor, who was elected by the teachers. The university owned property in the town and awarded degrees; the chancellor was one of the most important figures in Oxford, and he or his representatives controlled many of its courts, including, crucially; the court that determined rents.

To modern eyes one of the most striking features of the town would have been the number of churches and other religious buildings. There were eleven parish churches within the walls, two more just outside, and one in the castle. There were numerous chapels and chantries. Oseney Abbey, outside the town walls, and St Frideswide's Priory, both houses of Augustinian canons, were long established, as was the Hospital of St John the Baptist, outside the East Gate. In the thirteenth century the friars arrived: the Dominicans, or black friars, came to Oxford in 1225, and in 1245 started to build a vast friary just outside the south walls. The Franciscans, the grey friars, were next: they were granted land by the King and built a big friary that straddled the line of the town walls between the West Gate and the Little Gate, which led towards the Dominicans' land. The Carmelites and the Augustinian friars followed, and both built friaries to the north of the town.

We're used to seeing medieval buildings as they are now: bare stonework with all rendering, plastering and decoration removed, often askew because of centuries of subsidence, and sometimes no more than a pile of boulders. In 1278 the chapels, chantries and friaries, as well as the huge decagonal keep of the castle, were brand-new. Their stonework was perfectly aligned, their walls were smooth and straight, they were decorated with carvings, they were painted in bright colours, and – above all – they were big. At a time when most buildings were timber-framed and had wattle and daub walls, and even a wealthy merchant's house might have only a few courses of stonework, religious edifices must have seemed astonishing. The stone structures of Oxford - the castle, the town walls, the friaries and the churches – must have dwarfed everything else.

I've been trying to put this off, but I can't avoid explaining the appalling situation of Jewish people in England in the late thirteenth century.

There had been, no doubt, a few Jews in Britain when it was a Roman province. There would have been a few people from many of the ethnic groups that were contained within the Roman Empire. They would have come as soldiers, traders and specialist craftsmen, and no doubt some of them, and their descendants, stayed after the legions left.

The influence of continental Europe, in the form of Christian missionaries, returned to Britain soon after the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were established but in other respects, for the 600 years from the withdrawal of the Roman legions to the Norman Conquest, England looked, culturally and politically, towards what is now Germany and Scandinavia.

Although the Normans, as their name suggests, were originally Viking raiders, they came to look to southern Europe, and spread southwards from Normandy, and learned to speak French. When William, Duke of Normandy, invaded England, killed its king in battle and took the throne, he brought with him not only his noblemen and knights but also their servants, and clerks, and money-lenders – and the last of these were Jewish.

By the thirteenth century there were Jewish communities in most English towns. There were about 200 Jewish people in Oxford, and they had been among the wealthiest in the country. They lived in the parish of St Aldate's, along Fish Street, which was also known as Jewry.

Jews performed a valuable function in medieval society.

Christians were forbidden, by the Church and by law, to lend money at interest. And, as lending money is a risky business, there's no point in doing it unless you can charge interest.

Jews were permitted to lend money and to charge interest on the loans and, as it was made difficult for them to set up in any other trades, that's what they did.

The Norman fashion for building in stone, along with increasing prosperity, led to building projects, from castles to merchant ships, that were too costly to be funded by individuals, no matter how wealthy. The Church was such a large organisation that it could rely

on its own resources; the king could levy taxes; but noblemen, knights and merchants had to borrow money.

While the Jews thus provided a necessary service, it's not surprising that they were resented. It was, after all, unchristian to charge interest in the first place. Because loans were often secured on land, the properties of defaulters would pass to Jewish moneylenders who, being urban folk, promptly sold them on, usually to noblemen or monasteries because they were the only people who could afford to buy. As a result the Jews came to be seen as being in league with the Church and the aristocracy in depriving small landowners of their properties.

As they could expect no protection from the Church (the Dominicans, in particular, saw it as their mission to convert Jews to Christianity) or from their clients, Jews looked to the crown for security. And successive kings weren't above exploiting the fact. Jews were heavily taxed, and often their assets were taken by the crown at death. This, of course, obliged Jewish moneylenders to keep their interest rates high, and that in turn increased resentment against them.

Edward I thought of himself as a particularly Christian king, and in levying particularly heavy taxes on the Jews in his kingdom in order to pay for his military campaigns he was sure he was doing God's will.

By 1275 the Jews in England had been pauperised by Edward's taxes. They were no further use to the King as a source of funds, and so he made a law – the Statute of Jewry –

that forbade them lending money, and permitted them to engage in trade. This was, no doubt, a very popular measure, as well as being very Christian.

It was the beginning of the end for the Jews. They couldn't become traders and craftsmen – they had no capital to buy tools, and in any case they weren't part of the society in which they lived.

It is hard to imagine how they managed to keep going.

They were living in towns, among people who vilified them.

They had to buy everything, as they had no land to cultivate.

They must have gradually sold all their belongings, and then their houses, becoming more and more destitute.

In 1290 Edward made a law banning Jews from England.

And the law was gleefully enforced, with some slaughter. All Jews were expelled, having been stripped of their remaining possessions, often in unseaworthy craft.

There's nothing modern about ethnic cleansing.

After that, I'll turn to something trivial: a word or two about language and names.

The common people who lived in England thought of themselves as English (although it would be a mistake to assume they were patriotic – there was no such thing as a nation-state), and they spoke various dialects of the English language. Educated men – in other words mainly monks, canons and friars – could read Latin, and many could speak it with reasonable fluency. It was the European *lingua franca*, and it, along with the Church, maintained Christendom as a reality, and not just an ideal, that transcended regional loyalties.

Most of the nobility spoke Norman French, although by the end of the thirteenth century some, who owned lands in parts of what is now southern France as well as in England, might have spoken the *langue d'oc*, Provençal. Most of them probably had a grasp of English too: they would have needed it in order to give instructions to their clerks and servants.

Likewise, many English people must have had a smattering of French.

In practice most people must have adjusted their language to suit their audience. I imagine a nobleman speaking French when out hunting with his peers, using English to address the peasants working on his land, and struggling to remember the Latin he learnt as a boy at university when required to read a legal document. A street trader would speak English, but he'd know enough French to deliver a spiel to a passing aristocrat, and he'd have a few Latin phrases to bamboozle his customers.

In *Asylum* I've made some attempt to indicate the different languages. When a character is speaking Latin, his sentences are a bit convoluted. French sounds rather high-flown and polite. And English tends to be straightforward, with short words.

I have tried to give characters appropriate and historically accurate names. This was a time when English-speaking people, who traditionally had names such as Alfric or Godwin, were beginning to

adopt some French names, such as Robert, Hubert and Richard. Conversely, the great nobles, who were all of Norman French descent, had discovered a fashion for Englishness: Edward was a Plantagenet through and through, but he had been christened with an English name. Although he is known to history as Edward I, he was named after an earlier king of England: the Anglo-Saxon king (and saint) Edward the Confessor.

Surnames, as we know them, did not exist. People who owned land – from earls down to the gentry – had a family name that was constructed with ‘*de*’ or ‘*of*’ (depending on whether or not the family came over with the Conqueror, and how aristocratic the family was) followed by the name of the family’s main landholding. By the late thirteenth century a

‘surname’ such as this that had existed for several generations could be based on a place name that no longer formed part of the family’s landholding.

Other people had just one name – their Christian name. At the end of the thirteenth century surnames for the mass of the population were about to be invented: you can imagine the clerks in the courts growing increasingly frustrated at their inability to differentiate between plaintiffs and defendants and witnesses, and requiring everyone to provide not merely his or her Christian name but also another identifier: an occupation, perhaps, or father’s name, or place of residence or work. And that’s how we’ve ended up with surnames such as Thatcher, Smith and Baker; Robertson and Johnson; Green, Forest and Langland.

There are a lot of surnames that derive from occupations, even though they don’t look like it. These days there aren’t many people working as cartwrights, coopers, scriveners, reeves or fowlers, for instance, so we don’t instantly recognise as occupations the surnames that derive directly from such obsolete job names. And there are even more surnames that are disguised forms of ‘son of’. Names such as Richardson are easy to spot; even Dixon, Polson and Hewson are obvious when you think about them for a moment. But Richards, Jones, Peters and Evans are all ‘son of’ names, too. Most people know that the Scots ‘Mac’ or ‘Mc’ at the beginning of a surname mean ‘son of’, as does the Irish ‘O’ – and so we get Macdonald, McDonnell and O’Donnell, which all mean the same thing: son of Donald. It is less well known that many surnames beginning with P (or B) derive from the Welsh word

‘Ap’, which means, of course, ‘son of’. And so we get Pritchard and Pugh, Probert and Preece, and, less obviously, Bevan.

And that, I think, is quite enough about surnames. I find the subject fascinating, but I suspect it’s an eccentric taste.

So how much of *Asylum* have I made up? I’ve already mentioned Roger Bacon’s observatory. Matilda’s garden has no basis in history. In fact I’m not sure that gardens, in the sense of formally arranged patterns of flowers, trees, shrubs, walkways and so on, had been thought of in England by 1278.

So that could be completely unhistorical. Sorry.

I don’t know whether Franciscan friars had their own cells.

I suspect they might have slept in dormitories – but that would have made for insurmountable plot problems, so I gave the brothers individual rooms.

Castle Mill was the largest of Oxford’s mills, but I could find no detailed description of it, so I made it up. The Oxford Franciscans did own the land that extended from the town walls out to Trill Mill stream, and they had gardens there, but once again in the absence of any details about what they grew I gave them rows of beans and flocks of chickens and similar stuff that seemed reasonable.

Finally, you’ll have noticed that 1278 is warm and sunny, while 1346 is cold and wet. This is almost certainly a gross exaggeration of the climate change that occurred. Northern Europe enjoyed a long spell of very clement weather from the Iron Age to the thirteenth century. The fertility and productivity of what is now England no doubt encouraged the Romans to invade. They brought vines with them, and there were vineyards into medieval times. The generally mild climate no doubt helped the population to reach unprecedentedly high levels by the end of the thirteenth century.

And then there was a deterioration: the climate grew colder, and there were no vineyards in England from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. As recently as Victorian times the Thames in London froze over in winter: people used to skate on it. You don’t see that these days.

For whatever combination of reasons – too many people for the available resources, climate change, a run of poor harvests, too many expensive foreign wars – things started to go wrong for England from

the end of the thirteenth century.

There were famines, and some villages were abandoned. All these problems were insignificant compared with the coming of bubonic plague. The Black Death spread across the whole of Europe in just a few years, carried by fleas in the fur of rats.

In some places, particularly towns, it killed as much as half of the population in its first outbreak. And it came back again and again.

England, along with much of the rest of Europe, emerged fundamentally changed. The religious focus was different; labour was scarce and peasants and labourers were able to demand high wages, in coin, so the feudal system was fatally damaged; large areas of land were removed from cultivation, and have remained unfarmed ever since. But all of that is another story.

I think I've said more than enough about the writing of historical novels in general and *Asylum* in particular. As ever, I've tried to write something that's a little out of the ordinary run of Doctor Who novels. I hope you've enjoyed it.

About the Author

This piece is going to bear an uncanny resemblance to its equivalent in *Independence Day*. Six months have gone by, and I'm still, to my chagrin, old enough to remember seeing the broadcast of the first episode of Doctor Who in 1963.

When does reverse ageing kick in, that's what I'd like to know.

A lot has happened since 1963, and most of it – what it was like to be educated at a traditional selective grammar school, the counterculture scene of the early Seventies and its merging into glam-rock and then punk, why I missed the Pertwee years, how I sold *Dungeons & Dragons* to teenagers throughout the land and came to publish *White Dwarf* magazine, my first company directorship, when I wrote my first Fighting Fantasy Gamebook – you really don't want to know in any detail.

In 1989 I was trying to make a living from writing, and not succeeding. I applied for a part-time job: Doctor Who Editor at book publishers W H Allen. The books concerned were novelisations of the TV stories. W H Allen became Virgin Publishing, I became the Fiction Publisher, we acquired a licence from the BBC to publish original Doctor Who novels, and in 1992 there began a five-year stint of

almost uninterrupted publishing fun. We did *Doctor Who – The New Adventures*, and then *Doctor Who - The Missing Adventures*.

We published nonfiction books and illustrated books about Doctor Who. I wrote my first Doctor Who novel: *Deceit*. We published books about other television programmes: *Red Dwarf*, *Blake's 7*, *The Avengers*, *Babylon 5*, right up to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* last year. We published the infamous Black Lace imprint: erotic fiction by women and for women.

I'm in Southampton now, writing this, and also writing other books and doing bits of freelance copy-editing and proofreading. I still miss my London friends, and the talented people I worked with. Since I wrote *Independence Day* the most exciting occurrence has been writing off my car in an accident. Ho hum.

Peter Darvill-Evans

December 2000.

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